



WANDERING WITCH

The Journey of Elaina

JOUGI SHIRAISHI
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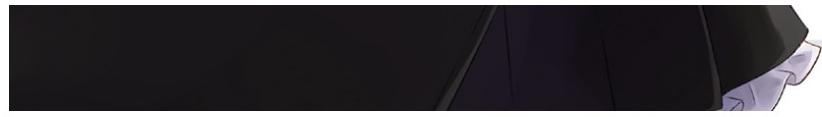


The young lady was a traveler.

She was also a witch.

The
Ashen Witch
ELAINA

A girl who earned
the title of "witch," the
highest rank for a mage.
As a child, she read a book
that inspired her to go on
a journey of her own.



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THE JOURNEY OF ELAINA + CHARACTERS



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NEW YORK

Copyright

Wandering Witch: The Journey of Elaina
Jougi Shiraishi

Translation by Nicole Wilder
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CHAPTER 1

One Girl's Troubles

On a moonlit street corner, a lone witch was working as a fortune-teller.

She was sitting quietly atop a cloth she had spread out on the ground. She was a girl with distinctive ashen hair and lapis eyes.

She wore a black robe, a pointy black hat, and a star-shaped brooch—proof she was a witch.

The stars twinkled high above the tall houses that loomed over the street, and their dazzling brilliance drifted down onto the crystal ball resting nearby.

She was a traveler and a witch.

“Miss Fortune-Teller? I just can’t do it anymore!”

“*Sigh.*” The witch grimaced and turned to face the drunk girl.

For some reason, the witch was telling fortunes.

In all honesty, she had simply run out of money. Now she was posing as a fortune-teller and working for small change.

“Listen to my story, won’t you?”

“I collect one gold piece as a consultation fee, is that all right?”

Who on earth could she be? Just who was this witch who was overcharging because she thought this customer would be a pain and wanted her to hurry up and leave?

That’s right. She’s me.

Unfortunately, the girl before me turned out to be quite rich.



First of all, I'm a fortune-teller... Why do I have to listen to other people's problems?

That's what I would've liked to grumble, but as I had already taken the girl's money, there was no helping it. I had to listen to her idle complaints.

From her appearance, I assumed she was having a difficult time, but having already collected my fee, there was no way I could ignore her story, no matter how much of a pain it would be.

"So I, like, waitress at a restaurant around here, y'know?"

"Mm-hmm."

"And, like, I want to quit my job?"

"Then you should probably quit."

"Recently, the customers are, like, really mean? They always have something to gripe about, and like, they lord it over me and complain, complain, complain if I make even one little mistake."

"They have nothing but complaints, I see."

"That's right! But, like, they just pile on the criticism until I'm left thinking, *You don't need to go that far!*—y'know? On top of all that, they always recite this dumb little phrase from some nearby country, like, 'The customer is always right!'"

"Mm-hmm."

"What do you think I should do?"

"They won't shut up, even if you offer up prayers?"

"Are you taking this consultation seriously? *Hic.*"

"Are you seriously asking me that...?"

"In the first place, like, sure, I'm an employee, and sure, the customers are paying me, but, like, so what? That's how I feel, y'know? Like, I thought we took the customers' money, gave them what they wanted, and that was the whole job."

"Mm-hmm."

"So I thought, *We're equals!* Like, if they're gonna

complain that much, I'm not gonna make them food! Right?"

"No, you're not equal."

"What are you saying, Miss Fortune-Teller? I gave you a whole gold piece, so could you be a little more professional? I'm the customer, y'know?"

"Are you really that eager to eat your words?"

"Oh...I can't do it anymore! I want to quit my job."

"I think that might be for the best."

"But I don't have any money."

"Didn't you just give me a gold piece?"

"That was everything I had."

"I'll give it back."

"Miss Fortune-Teller, you're so nice... Oh...to think I was lucky enough to meet someone so nice... This world isn't such a bad place after all... *Sniff*."

"....."

"Hey, Miss Fortune-Teller? What do you think I should do?"

"Let's see... All right, I'll give you a little advice."

"...? Hmm?"

"I think you should be more honest with yourself."

"What do you mean?"

"If someone has a complaint, you shouldn't be afraid to defend yourself. You should tell them how you really feel."

"If I could do that, I wouldn't be having such a hard time!"

"Here, this is for you."

"A bottle? What's this stuff inside?"

"That's enchanted water. Drink it, and you'll be able to let your true self out."

"Wow...! To think such water exists...!"

"Yep. Go ahead. Think of it as a gift from me. Drink it and do your best at your job starting tomorrow."

"...Oh. I can't. I don't want to go to work."

"Come on now, don't say that."

She proceeded to gripe in front of my stall for another several dozen minutes, until finally, she said, "Oh, I need to use the bathroom," and started heading home.

She loudly gulped down the water I had given her and shouted, "Wow! I feel like I've rediscovered my true self somehow!"

"....."

It was just ordinary water, of course. The feeling she interpreted as her "rediscovering her true self" was just her sobering up.

On another day, in that same country, one of the waitresses at a certain establishment became a hot topic of conversation.

She had been hurling abuse at customers and sounded like an all-around awful person. If you tried to place an order, she would click her tongue as she approached your table and glare at you as she carried the food out. Whenever customers paid the bill, she would always send them off with an, "Okay, get lost. And don't come back."

For some reason, it seemed that the customers (mainly men) took a profound liking to her strange attitude, and before long, business was booming. Customers came in droves, saying things like, "I want to be abused!" Everyone in this country was a little off like that. After all, there's no doubt they got a thrill out of ogling an apathetic waitress and enduring her verbal abuse. Everyone in this country was a little bit off like that.

Now she was the literal poster girl.

There was a huge line out the door of the restaurant every single day.

What on earth caused her to act like this?

A certain newspaper ran an interview.

"I just thought it was important to let my true self out."

That's what she said.

.....

But that's not what I meant...



CHAPTER 2

A Peaceful Slumber

It was the season when cold and warm blended together.

The breeze blowing over the plains held the lingering cool of winter.

The early spring sun was warm, pleasantly contrasting with the chill of the winter wind. A girl was flying over a field of flowers on a broom, her eyes fixed straight ahead. She rubbed her arms every now and again.

She was a witch and a traveler.

She wore a black robe, a pointy black hat, and a star-shaped brooch—proof she was a witch.

Her ashen hair peeked out from under her hat and trailed behind her, blowing in the brisk breeze.

Her lapis eyes were focused on a small city ahead, standing quietly between the blue sky and the grassy plain.

“So that place is next, huh...?”

Well, well, what a place for it.

Who on earth could she be? Who was this girl, traveling as always? Passing through the beautiful scenery as always?

That's right. She's me.

As always.

“Excuse me!”

I landed my broom in front of the gate and called out to anyone who might be there, but I didn't get an answer.

It seemed like the kind of place where a person would suddenly pop up to greet a traveler, but my approach was met with silence. I grew concerned.

What's going on here? Can I just go in? I thought for sure there would be a guard at the gate or something.

Well, if no one's coming out, I guess I can just head in.

And so I set foot inside.

“...Oh!”

Rows of traditional houses, with plain-colored brick walls and tiled roofs, lined both sides of the street. They had small cracks here and there and some dull, dirty spots, but in the uniform townscape, these imperfections simply seemed like part of the scenery. An atmosphere of calm quiet hung over the town like a blanket.

There wasn't a single person in sight.

I wandered around for a short while and found a large plaza.

I stopped dead in my tracks.

There was a huge hole in the center of the plaza, and the earth that had been excavated from it was piled high as a mountain. In the middle of an otherwise-empty city, this place bore a scar left by human hands.

“.....”

When I peered into the hole, I understood why I hadn't encountered another living soul.

Within the enormous pit lay a pile of bodies wrapped in cloth.

A massive quantity of them.

The reason I hadn't seen any other people was because they had all been gathered here.

“...Hmm. Who's there?”

I was staring into the grave in blank amazement when there came a voice. It sounded like a girl.

When I turned around, she was looking down on me from up in the sky. She was sitting astride a broom and gripping a wand in one hand. The girl, who had her golden hair knotted into a bun behind her head, wore neither a robe nor a pointy black hat.

However, that she was a mage was clear, as floating behind her broom were many more bodies wrapped in cloth. She seemed to be levitating them with magic.

She addressed me as she carefully lowered her haul into the pit. “You're not from this country.”

I nodded. "I'm a traveler. I made my way here on my broom."

"Is that so...? I suppose you wanted to spend the night or something?"

"That was my plan."

Until I saw this awful spectacle, that is.

"I think it would be best if you reconsider."

"I think you might be right about that."

Nodding slowly, the girl landed her broom in front of me. She was roughly a head taller than me, and as I looked up at her, she gazed down at me.

"Well, you can see the state the place is in. In any case, the city will be sealed tomorrow."

"...What happened?"

As far as I can see, everyone is dead, but...

As if the girl could see into my mind as I looked down into the grave where she had just piled the people, she said, following my gaze, "All of these people were asleep, trapped in a slumber that mimics death."

She cast her eyes downward.



Apparently, there had been a famous prophet in this city.

When the prophet was young, he predicted the future for the sake of his neighbors, including the weather, crop yields, the whereabouts of lost pets, the days' fortunes, even people's life spans and their fated partners.

Although not *every* prediction came true with perfect accuracy, most of them did, perhaps because the prophet's words carried some mysterious magic power. Even when a prediction missed the mark, he could deflect with the convenient explanation that "Your fate must have changed since I foretold the prophecy." If you ask me, the people who lived here had been a little too willing to believe.

Anyway, enraptured by his mystifying power, the citizens all relied on the prophet and often rushed to him without a second thought. The prophet grew older, and by the time his face was lined with wrinkles, one could say he was revered as the most important person in the entire country.

The girl I had encountered earlier—her name was Charlotte—had also been a believer.

However, even with the power to see the future, he couldn't cheat death, which slowly but surely came for everyone. About six months ago, surrounded by many of his countrymen, the prophet peacefully breathed his last, as if he were simply falling asleep.

After his death, the citizens became terribly frightened. It was not the loss of their prophet that scared them, though.

Just before he passed, the prophet had made one final, terrifying prediction: "In half a year's time, this city shall be destroyed."

They didn't know precisely when in the allotted time it would happen. They also didn't know what would be the cause of this disaster, but the prophet's skill and the ambiguousness of his words filled the citizens with an unbearable sense of dread.

In less than half a year, most of the residents had abandoned the city. They feared they would perish along with their homes.

Eventually, fewer than one hundred remained.

These were the people who loved their city more than anything else.

They lived quietly, dreading the devastation that would visit them at some unknown hour.

Then, just four nights ago, something had happened.

Charlotte had gotten into bed as always, and when she eventually drifted off into slumber, she had a very strange dream.

"Oh, hello there. You're Charlotte, aren't you?"

In this dream, a demon appeared before her. The demon was the spitting image of Charlotte but had crooked horns growing out of its head and bat wings sprouting from its back. It was a curious creature.

“And you are?”

“I’m someone who can grant your wish. You’re merely passing the days in this city until your death, aren’t you? That’s far too pitiful, so I’m going to grant you a wish in this dream. There are no limits. You can ask me for anything your heart desires. I’ll show you your ideal world.”

“Um, that’s awfully suspicious...”

“Because I’m a demon?”

Charlotte didn’t really understand her misgivings, but since this was a dream, where even the absurd is ordinary, she decided not to think about it too deeply.

“So what kind of wish would you like to make? I’ll give you three days to live out your perfect fantasy.”

“.....”

Since she was in a dream, she couldn’t come up with a good objection.

So she made a wish.

“All right, I want to become a mage,” she’d said.

Then, as Charlotte told it, the three days she spent in her dream were truly ideal. She flew through the sky on a broom, she summoned all kinds of things with spells, and she whiled away her time using magic just as she pleased.

Time in the dream passed by in a flash, and in the middle of the third day, the demon appeared before her again.

“How was it? Did you have fun? By the way, if you want, you could live this dream again. After all, even if you go back to the real world, you won’t have anything to do but wait for death, right? In that case, don’t you think you’d be happier living a fun life in this endless dream?”

What the demon was saying was true. Even if she awoke, all that awaited Charlotte was the sorrowful anticipation of the end.

But she did not accept the demon's offer.

At that point, I tilted my head in confusion. "Why not?" I asked.

Charlotte answered, "Think about it. Sure, I would be happy if I could continue living in the dream, and there would be no need to sit around waiting for death. But can that really be called living? No matter how splendid the dream, I would have to wake up at some point, right? Eventually, I would have to return to the real world. Even if death is just around the corner, locking myself away in the perfect dream isn't really living, I think."

"...You're probably right."

"So I refused the demon's offer."

As if it had known all along that she was going to shake her head "no," the demon only muttered, "Oh, is that so?" It was a truly indifferent response. And then... "If you truly wish to return to reality, I'll give you a parting gift. You know, to remember me by."

"...Huh."

Thinking this was a strange dream indeed, Charlotte nodded.

"You enjoyed being a mage in your dream, right? I'm going to give you the ability to use magic in the real world, too. When you open your eyes, you should be able to perform spells and such exactly as you could in your dream."

"...Huh."

Thinking what a silly conversation it was, Charlotte had said, "Thanks." She was appropriately cool about it.

After all, this was an imagined exchange, and she was certain that when she returned to reality, there would be nothing waiting for her but the slow creep toward death. Given that, it was possible her response was a touch dismissive.

"I've stolen more than enough lives, so there's no harm making one dream come true—consider this a freebie."

You'll be able to use magic in the real world. No strings attached."

Finally, the demon smiled. Charlotte said it was clearly forced.

"It was nothing more than idle banter, but just as the demon in my dream had said, I awoke with the ability to use magic. I can fly through the air on a broom, and I can summon just about anything with a spell."

Charlotte spoke dispassionately to the end. "I was sure everyone else would also have emerged from their dreams having received something incredible. Thinking this, I flew all over the city."

"....."

"And this is what I found."

"...No one else woke up?"

She nodded slowly.

"It looks like they all traded the burdens of life for blissful dreams."



Charlotte told me she had awoken to find her fellow citizens had all passed away, so peacefully that they looked as if they were still asleep.

It was obvious what had happened.

Charlotte had dug a grave for her deceased neighbors, wrapped their lifeless corpses in cloth, and tossed them into the pit.

"By the way, the bodies I just dropped off were the last of them. I'm the only one left."

"What are you going to do now?"

"Let's see. Well, after filling in the hole, I'm thinking I should leave this place," she said. "Honestly, I was planning to perish along with the city, to accept the destruction that had been foretold, but now I've got magic powers. It would

be a waste to simply stay here and die."

"In other words?"

"I'm going to leave."

Then she waved her wand.

Soil piled up on top of the bodies, and before long, the hole itself had vanished.



I decided to leave before the day ended.

I didn't want to be in this city, deserted and mostly destroyed, blanketed by an eerie atmosphere, any longer than necessary.

After exchanging a few parting words with Charlotte, I passed through the gate again and headed for the plains.

"....."

The city would be destroyed tomorrow.

Just as the prophet had predicted, there wouldn't be a single person left half a year after his death. Though in truth, the city wouldn't have been destroyed and would have continued to exist had he said nothing.

I was certain the ruin had only befallen this place because that's what everyone had expected to happen. This ending had been invited by the trusting hearts of the people, and a demon had taken advantage of them.

In this life, if you always went around expecting the worst, everything would naturally become gloomy. If you spent every day looking for the easy way out, though, you'd lose perspective and, before you knew it, might lose your life as well. Just like the citizens who'd abandoned their waking lives in favor of an endless dream.

"....."

In the end, it was important to have balance. Dealing in extremes could leave one broken.

That's why...

For the time being, I'm more than happy leaving things as they are. Both good and bad.

I'll tell the tale of my travels plainly and simply.

As always.



CHAPTER 3

The Day's Newspaper

Hello! I'm Elaina! The Ashen Witch, Elaina!

I've been on the road for several years, and for the past several days, I've been staying in this country!

I'm a beautiful young witch whose most outstanding characteristics are my lovely ash-colored hair and my lapis-blue eyes! I'm always wearing a pointy black hat and a black robe. If you see me around town, say something to me, okay? Oh-ho-ho!

By the way, this country is incredible, isn't it?

The food is delicious, I don't care what anyone says! This is the first time I've been to a country with food *this* good! No doubt about it, the food here is the best in the world! It's exquisite! I give everything five stars! You can boast that everything—from the dishes served at restaurants, to the coffee in the cafés, not to mention the bread in the street stalls—is undoubtedly the most delicious in the world.

What's more, the scenery you can take in from town is just wonderful! If you look up, the sky is as clear as can be, and at night, you can gaze at a whole canopy of stars.

Looking at the snowcapped mountains from the viewing platform is a sight to behold, and when you listen carefully, you can hear the rustling breeze.

It's too wonderful!

Even though the food and the scenery are more than incredible in their own right, this country has so much more to offer!

The breathtaking landscape and the people living here are amazing enough to overshadow the food and sights!

Between the rows and rows of historic buildings, happy residents all greet me with smiling faces. They quickly come

to my assistance anytime I get lost or run into trouble, and the shop owners all treat their customers like royalty.

This is the first place I've ever tried to leave a tip after my meal at a restaurant only to have it refused. My server told me, "There's no need for that. We don't do that here!" Amazing! What service!

I am moved beyond words!

What's more, every man living in this country is so handsome! There are nothing but good-looking guys in every direction!

This is especially tough because I'm not in the market to fall in love right now! Oh-ho-ho!

All things considered, I've enjoyed the several days I've stayed here immensely.

Ah, the memories.

I don't think I'll encounter a country as amazing as this one ever again!

○

"....."

Newspapers were lined up near the counter of the café, and I was trying to read them all in order, starting at one end and working my way to the other.

I like to gather as much information as possible, and it's interesting because, depending on the newspaper company, their stances regarding certain stories are always different, and sometimes they even write the exact opposite opinions. It's the best way to kill time while waiting for my coffee to arrive.

Plus, some places get the newspapers of neighboring countries as well, though that practice varies from place to place.

"....."

It looked like the country I had arrived in that day was

one of the aforementioned places, and the newspaper of the neighboring country—one I had visited a few days earlier—was there on the shelf.

I read it, of course.

“...What is this?”

I was shocked, to say the least.

You could even say it made my blood boil.

I was livid and balled up the newspaper with all my might. My expression must have also turned quite severe, because the waitress who brought my coffee over said, “Thank you for waiting *aaah!*” and shrieked.

“...Oh, sorry. Thank you.” I laid the newspaper down for the moment and took a deep breath.

“Um, no problem... Is there something wrong with that paper?” The waitress set the coffee down on the table.

“I’ve visited the country in this article before.”

“Oh my. You have? Ha-ha, I see, I see.” As if she understood something I didn’t, the waitress held her tray in both hands and nodded steadily. “I don’t suppose you were invited to fill out a survey upon leaving the country, too?”

Hmm?

“*Too*, you say?”

Sure enough, I do recall being forced to write one.

They’d pushed it on me with the promotional line *We’ve recently been publishing visitor feedback in a newspaper column.*

“I’ve also been there before, and, well...the next day, when I came back here, there was a similar article filled with lies written in the paper.”

“.....”

I see. That newspaper must be nothing but a hoax. It isn’t the least bit trustworthy, is it? There’s no point reading a newspaper without any credibility. Might as well toss it into a roaring fireplace.

“You know, that country was rather isolated until quite recently. That’s why I went to check it out. It was a rare

opportunity. Seems like they really care about their reputation abroad. On my survey, I'm certain I wrote, *I didn't see anything particularly novel*, but it was changed to look like I had said, *It's like something out of a novel!*"

"...Huhhh? Order? Just fill out the sales slip! What, you wanna complain? You pig!" An angry ruckus rang out across the room.

After taking quick stock of the situation, the girl in front of me shrugged and said, "...I bet that even if you had an attitude like that guy, they would just twist your words."

"....." After confirming the expression of the offended waitress at the other end of the counter, I pulled the brim of my pointy black hat down low and said, "But what's the point of changing visitors' feedback so drastically?"

"Who knows? Not me, that's for sure."

"Hmm..."

"By the way, this is just something I heard, but..." the waitress started, "...the people in that country have opened their borders, yet not a single person has left."

"Oh? Why's that?"

"Maybe it's because they like thinking that their homeland is the best."

"....."

They don't want to leave their country. They don't have the courage.

In order to hide their fear, perhaps, the locals falsify their newspaper articles to make their home sound really amazing. That way, since they're already living somewhere so incredible, there's no need to go out to see the world.

"By the way, has anyone actually immigrated to there?"

In response to my question, the waitress smiled and gave the obvious answer.

"Nope. I don't know of a single one."



CHAPTER 4

Grape-Stomping Girls

It was the tenth year of a harvest festival held between two neighboring villages.

I heard that before the festival had become a tradition, the two villages would feud and quarrel over small matters. But now, no trace of their rivalry remained. In fact, the younger generations began viewing the two less as neighbors and more as one large community.

"Hey, Grandpa? Is our village really friendly with that one over there?"

However, this boy was a little skeptical about the friendship between the two villages—or one large village, as it were. The way he saw it, today's harvest festival was only going to disrupt their amicable relationship.

The old man set a wooden crate full of grapes down in the middle of the road and lightly tapped on his lower back.

"Why are you worried about us holding the festival?"

"Hmm..."

"Hoh-hoh-hoh... We hold it to remind us of our friendship, you know!"

"Huh? But..."

The boy peered into the crate of grapes. The recently picked fruit sparkled vibrantly in the sunlight. There were any number of similar crates placed along either side of the narrow, short road that separated the two villages—too many to count. All in preparation for the main event of the harvest festival.

The people from each village would grab the grapes from the crates and throw them back and forth, until they were stained with the juice. It was a wasteful event.

The ostensible pretense for the festival was to pray that

this year's harvest would be as bountiful as the grape juice stains on their clothes, but the participants were awfully barbaric.

For example, at the previous year's festival, a young man from one village poured grapes over the head of a girl from the other village as retaliation for dumping him. In another case, a couple living in the same village smeared each other's faces while verbally abusing a third person and yelling about the grievances that had piled up over the course of their daily lives.

For some reason, the locals who lived amicably for the majority of the year underwent a sudden change on this day and acted like they were possessed by demons.

It got so bad that the relationship between the villages always seemed as if it would break down. Remarkably, though, whenever the festival ended, everything went back to the way it was before—except for the juice-stained road—and the villagers would return to their peaceful lives.

It probably served as a way of periodically letting off steam. Holding such a wild harvest event was probably the key to keeping the friendship between the two villages alive.

The boy already understood that well enough.

He was all the more skeptical for it.

If they were really on good terms, they wouldn't need to hold such an event in the first place, would they?

"Your suspicions are correct. Our two villages aren't exactly the best of friends. Ordinarily, we do many things to irritate each other, and both sides consider the folks living down the road rivals, at best."

"So why have a festival like this?"

"That's exactly why. By throwing grapes at each other, we can let out all our pent-up frustration. We're not bosom buddies by any means. There simply came a day when we found the courage to be honest with each other. That day was ten years ago."

"Hmm..."

"Come to think of it, I've never told you the story of what happened ten years ago, have I? Well, would you like to hear it?"

"I would! Please, tell me!"

The old man stared off into the sky. The wide, empty expanse, without a trace of birdsong, was the same as always, and exactly as it had been for the past decade.

"That day, ten years ago...a traveler came to our village."

"Oh?"

Ah, this is gonna be a long story for sure, the boy realized immediately.

He thought that if it was going to drag on, he would have liked for the old man to wait until they got home to tell it.

"That traveler was a young witch with long, flowing, ash-colored hair. She was truly an angel, but she had a devilish side, too."

"Hmm."

"The day that mysterious witch came to our village became a day we would never forget..."

Then the old man told the story.

The story of what happened on that day, ten years ago.



An angelic witch, who seemed like a devil when you looked closely enough, was in the middle of her journey.

Who could she be?

That's right. She's me.

"....."

Her setting was a tranquil country road.

The clear, light blue sky stretched out into the distance, hanging there, pristine and tranquil, without so much as birdsong to disturb the peace. The small road that passed between the green fields was the color of naked earth and

ran between the two villages I could see up ahead.

I was flying on my broom, following the winding road. The frequent, gentle breezes that blew down it brushed past me, giving me a chill whenever I picked up speed.

Feeling just right, I took a deep breath and fixed my gaze ahead.

There I saw two small towns standing side by side. To the rest of the world, these wonderful little communities were known as the wine villages.

"Welcome, Madam Witch! Oh, you couldn't have picked a better day to visit us! Please come in, come in. Our chieftain is most eager to welcome you."

I received a very warm welcome when I arrived at the first of the villages.

People poured from their houses, smiling happily when they got a peek at my face.

I also received a warm greeting at the home of the village chieftain, where a not-quite-elderly man was joyfully clapping his hands. "Hoh-hoh-hoh! Well, aren't you just precious!"

Did he just call me cute?

"Thank you, thank you. I know, I know." I didn't understand why I was suddenly being praised, so for the time being, I just smiled and nodded.

Whenever I don't know what's going on, I just put on a vague smile and things usually work themselves out. This is my secret to success.

Anyway...

"This village is famous for its wine, right?"

"Indeed. Grape wine is our village's specialty. Say... you're quite young, but I suppose you like wine, don't you?"

"Mm..."

I've honestly never had it. I actually came because I heard the wine is supposed to be incredibly delicious.

I figured that if I was going to go out of my way to try wine for the first time, I ought to try the best I could find.

“The wine produced here has an incredibly lovely flavor, to be sure. It’s a taste beyond compare! The output of the neighboring village certainly doesn’t come close. Our wine is fit for the gods themselves.”

“Wow.”

Incidentally, I’d heard, “The taste of what either village has to offer is largely the same. Neither is particularly unique.” There was probably some difference that only a local could detect, though.

“But our neighbors are stubborn, you see, and don’t want to be outdone by us, so recently, they’ve started doing something new! Something outrageous!”

“Oh?”

“They’ve started producing *this!*”

Wham!

The village chieftain slammed a single wine bottle down on the table.

The label affixed to it read, A WINE OF EXCEPTIONAL QUALITY, SURPASSING EVEN THE WINES FROM FIVE YEARS AGO, WHEN WE BOASTED OUR BEST HARVEST. It was impossible to tell anything about the actual flavor from such a vague description. The label gave the name as WINE FROM THAT VILLAGE.

That Village? What’s that supposed to mean?

“By the way, the name of our village is This Village.”

So it’s the name? I see.

Instead of focusing on that stupid bit of information, what interested me most was something in the middle of the label.

It was the smiling face of a girl with wavy blond hair.

“I squish-squashed these grapes with love,” said her speech balloon. Accompanying it was a description—ORIGIN: ROSEMARIE, ONE OF THAT VILLAGE’S WINE-STOMPING MAIDENS.

“.....Um, what’s this?”

When I asked, the village chieftain loudly slammed a fist on the table.

"This! This is That Village's desperate ploy. They know they can't beat us, so they've resorted to this! Look at little Rosemarie there on the label! Listing Rosemarie as the 'origin'! What are those folks up to?!"

"She's less of an origin and more of a maker, right?"

"Listing her as the 'origin' rather than the 'winemaker' gets certain buyers more...excited."

"....."

Excited?

"In other words, by selling products that appeal to a... very particular taste...That Village's wine sales are shooting through the roof!"

"Ohh..."

So it sells?

This kind of thing seriously sells?

"Because of this, we find ourselves in quite a predicament. We're really struggling!"

"But isn't this the same wine, just with a different label? I mean, does it even taste good?"

"...I w-wouldn't know, I've n-never drunk any."

But you're shaking, aren't you? You've had it, haven't you?

I mean, if you look closely, the bottle is empty, isn't it? You drank it all, didn't you?

"Of course. Wine squish-squashed by a cute girl would surely be delicious..."

"By the way, what is 'squish-squashing'?"

"In our village, the girls who stomp the grapes with their feet call the act 'squish-squashing.'"

"Huh..." *What's with this weird, weird obsession?* "Well then, why don't you try competing by having cute girls squish-squash your grapes, too?"

My proposed solution was vague and a little lazy. I thought it would abruptly end this conversation before it

could head in an even more uncomfortable direction.

Once again, I utilized my secret to success.

“A wonderful suggestion!”

However, at that point, the village chieftain struck the table with both hands and leaned toward me.

“That’s exactly it! We can beat them if we have squish-squashing maidens even more charming than theirs!”

“H-huh...?”

“What I mean is...you! You can do it for us!”

“...Hmm?”

“The plan requires an especially captivating maiden, right?”

“...Hmmm?”

“So it has to be you. You’re the only one for the job!”

“...Hmmmm?”

What?

I really didn’t think my secret to success would backfire so spectacularly.



“Everyone! Listen up! This witch is going to be our grape-stomping maiden this year!”

The chieftain flew out of the house immediately, shouting to the people gathered in the center of town.

As soon as his words reached them, they threw up their hands and cheered.

“What did he say?!” “It’s sure to go great if it’s this witch!” “Chief...I want to drink wine stomped by girls!” “I’m sick of wine that was squish-squashed by old ladies!” “Chief! I bought the latest batch of Rosemarie’s wine. Want a swig?” “To think we’re going to get such a cute witch to stomp grapes for us!” “Hooray!”

.....

No, no, no, no.

"Um, I haven't actually agreed to anything, though."

"Everyone! The witch is very enthusiastic!"

I'm not enthusiastic! My enthusiasm is nonexistent!

"Umm, this is quite difficult for me to tell you, but—"

"All right, everyone! Dump our whole harvest into a huge bucket and bring it here! We'll make her stomp until she drops!"

Uh-oh, you've showed your hand.

I'm outta here.

With that, I turned on my heel, threw my bag over my shoulder, and started walking.

The villagers were already running around, preparing bucket after bucket. They were way too excited about forcing me to squash grapes.

I don't know about that.

Suddenly, they were ignoring me. As happy as they were, the locals were focused entirely on their preparations, so it seemed like an ideal moment to sneak off. If necessary, I could also always make a quick getaway on my broom.

I started strolling away, but...

"Goodness! Look at all the people from old, obsolete This Village! Whatever could you all be up to? Hmm?"

Unbelievably, someone was blocking my escape.

A blond girl whom I had seen somewhere before brought her hand to her mouth in a spiteful manner. And as she did, she eyed the villagers with naked contempt. She had the aura of a boss or a queen and had many burly men lined up behind her, hauling a cart.

"Y-you're...Rosemarie!"

"How do you do, Chief? What might you be doing here?"

"It has nothing to do with you! I should be the one asking questions! What are you all doing here?! We're in This Village!"

The chieftain had put on a threatening air, but I could see he was still clutching the wine bottle that listed Rosemarie as its origin. Clearly, he was just posturing.

Rosemarie snorted. "Humph, I just came to sell some wine. I've got many carts full. I always tell you to leave the road open, since we'll be passing by for a while. Why are you all in such an uproar?"

"You're...making fools of us...!"

"Oh? What's that bottle you're gripping in your hand?"

"....."

The chieftain hid the evidence immediately.

If you looked closely, it even had Rosemarie's signature on it.

He must be quite the fan!

"Also, who is this shrimpy little girl, and why's she dressed up in some sort of witch costume?"

How rude!

"I look like this because I'm a real witch."

After casting a fleeting glance my way, Rosemarie turned back to face the chieftain. "Oh. Hmm." She seemed to have realized something as she looked over the villagers and their wine-making preparations. Her expression turned sour. "I see. You can't beat me, so you're planning to use this shabby girl to squish-squash your grapes? Oh-ho."

"Did you say 'shabby'?"

"Her face is questionable, too. Not to mention, she has the body of a little kid."

"Questionable? Little kid?"

"Yeah, you look just like a child. You all realize you can't beat me by making a child like this squish-squash your grapes, don't you?"

"....."

I'm getting annoyed.

Imagine being openly mocked by someone you just met.

"Well, give it your best shot. We're off to squish-squash a new batch, so if you'll excuse us—step aside, Miss Shabby Witch."

"....."

Oh-ho. I can't possibly stay silent after hearing her

mouth off at me like that.

"I'm Elaina. My name is Elaina." I took a step forward and glared at Rosemarie's smug face. "Remember it."

"Perhaps you didn't hear me? I said get out of my sight."

Her expression didn't change in the least, and that was all she said. It was a perfectly triumphant attitude. Even though we weren't competing, Rosemarie's face seemed to say she would never have considered me as competition anyway.

...How irritating.

I guess I've got no choice but to crush her.

In the end, I got so worked up that I agreed to cooperate with them and become the grape-stomping maiden for This Village.

Sure, it was my decision, but...

"Why the costume?"

According to the village chieftain, the maiden doing the stomping had to don a certain outfit...apparently.

It consisted of a frilly, wine-red skirt and a long-sleeved top of the same color. The wrists of the top were also decorated with frills, and it looked like nothing so much as an all-red maid's uniform.

Why on earth do I have to wear an outfit like this?

According to the chieftain, it made the product more exciting. I couldn't understand his reasoning.

"All right, go on and squish-squash the grapes, Miss Witch."

"....."

It was clear my long hair would be troublesome while stomping wine, so after tying it into a bun, I placed a bare foot into the bucket of fruit.

"By the way, how should I stomp them?"

"It would be best if you could really pour your love into it."

“.....”

And what am I supposed to do when I have no love to invest, huh?

“For the time being, I’ll pour in all my hate for Rosemarie.”

“That would be stomping! You have to squish-squash!”

I ignored him.

“...Okay!” I then grabbed the hem of the skirt in both hands, lifted it to my knee, and brought my foot down into the bucket.

The light green grapes that filled it felt chilly on the bottoms of my feet. Using my weight, I smushed the grapes until they could no longer withstand the pressure and squirted their juice. A thick, sweet scent seeped out from under my sole. I lifted my leg to escape the wet slurry, but as there was no escape, I once again brought my foot down onto the gross grape mash. The more I stomped, the more the shredded grape skins wound themselves around my toes.

Crush, squeeze, and crush again. The round, soft feeling gradually gave way to a strange sensation like stepping on wet sand.

It felt a little gross, but somehow, I quickly grew accustomed to the odd experience. To be honest, it was actually quite thrilling.

“Die...die...die...die...!”

That’s why I was so enthusiastic.

The villagers watching me were snapping photos left and right and raising shouts of joy. I think my angry expletives were probably also directed at the villagers, who were taking photos just as they pleased.

Eventually, my legs became sloppy with grape juice. The villagers were livelier than I care to mention, and I was quickly getting stressed out.

I eventually got so frazzled that I just zoned out and stomped grapes single-mindedly.

“.....”

How difficult it must be for Rosemarie, forced to do this every day.

She has to stomp grapes while carrying the hopes and dreams of the people of That Village on her shoulders.

.....

Then again, her troubles and how nasty she was to me don't exactly cancel each other out...



“...I’m exhausted.”

After trampling for some time, I took a brief break at the village chieftain’s house. According to the chieftain, the villagers wanted me to stomp grapes again after resting. He said they wanted to produce a huge quantity of wine, since this was a one-time thing.

“Oh, great work, Miss Witch. Here, have a look. Here’s one of the bottles we’re going to put the wine you made into.”

He placed a bottle before me.

Top-Quality Wine from This Village

I made this with all my hatred and irritation.

ORIGIN: THE ASHEN WITCH ELAINA



©Azure



So read the label, on which was printed a photo of me stomping the grapes with a hateful grin on my face.

"...Can you sell it like this?"

I feel like no one's going to buy it.

"We thought This Village would use a different plan of attack than That Village. Over there, they're selling Rosemarie's beauty, but here, we decided it would be best to completely remove that element and use an alternate approach."

"....."

"It ought to be a big hit with the right customer."

"Is everyone who buys wine a huge pervert or something?"

"Well, when they're buying Rosemarie's wine, yeah, probably."

"....."

What's so great about getting drunk off wine that was stomped by a girl? I really don't see the appeal. It's giving me a headache just thinking about it, so let's cut off this topic of conversation here.

"By the way, roughly how much wine can you make from the amount I crushed?"

"Let me see...probably about half a cask."

"Huh? That's so little!"

I thought I stomped way more than that.

"That's why we'd like to get you to stomp the remaining half."

Honestly, it's such a pain.

However, if I were to give up at this point, I just knew that Rosemarie would delight in mocking me. "Aha!" she would say. "*So you quit, just as expected! It's like I said, the job of a grape-stomping maiden—stomping and stomping endlessly—is no easy task for an amateur!*"

Hmm.

.....

"...Hmm?" At that point, it suddenly hit me. "Um, Chief,

that bottle...the one that you're clutching even now, like your life depends on it—just how many of those are being sold?"

The village chieftain lovingly stroked the bottle as he replied, "A great deal of them. That Village has grown very prosperous selling wine that's all made by Rosemarie."

"All of it...?"

Which must mean that she spends every day, from morning to night, stomping grapes.

.....

Wait.

Those numbers seem a bit off.

Everything about it seems off.

"....."

After thinking about it a little bit, I had one thing to say.

"Hey, Chief...how long until break time ends?"

After that, I left the village chieftain's house and, still wearing my grape-stomping-maiden outfit, put on my shoes and ran to That Village.

I had several suspicions about this situation.

They had devised such a simple trick that it was a total mystery how not a single person from This Village had realized it, even this late in the game.

Following the numerous wheel ruts carved into the road, I kept running toward That Village.

One of my misgivings was those wheels.

It seemed like Rosemarie was selling the wine herself, with the help of some men, but why would she lend a hand with sales if she was also shouldering the whole burden of stomping the grapes?

It was even stranger still that all the wine from That Village would be produced by Rosemarie.

Just how many grapes would she have to stomp to produce enough to allow an entire village to flourish? How long would that take?

How did she even have the free time to sell bottles

herself?

Surely it was impossible for a single person to produce all of it.

“.....”

To put it simply—

“Oh-hoh-hoh... Come on, keep up the pace for all our sakes, you idiots! You want to sell wine with my label on it, don’t you? Then move it!”

The wheel ruts led to a single warehouse.

Brawny men were guarding the entrance, but I easily put them to sleep with a spell and cracked the door slightly.

Inside, I could hear a voice that sounded like Rosemarie’s. I saw her relaxing in a chair, arms crossed, swirling a wineglass with one hand.

She was there, lounging as I had expected.

“...I knew it.”

She wasn’t a grape-stomping maiden at all. She wasn’t stomping anything.

So who was producing the wine?

“Heave-ho! Let’s go! Heave-ho! Let’s go! Heave-ho! Let’s go!”

The answer was very simple. One look, and it was immediately clear.

The burly men who had been pulling the carts were the ones doing the squish-squashing. The men were dripping with sweat as they crushed the grapes, and the resulting wine... Well, this was the true identity of the wine produced by Rosemarie.

In other words, she was a fraud.

“.....”

This is grounds for litigation!



“That’s not right! It was only for today! Today, just by

chance, I didn't feel up to it! Usually, I'm squish-squashing grapes from morning until night!"

After tying them all up with rope on the spot, I dragged Rosemarie and the men out to the single road between That Village and This Village.

Perhaps realizing that something was amiss when they saw her and the men tied up, the people from This Village gathered around, still holding the grapes they had been preparing for stomping. The people from That Village also gathered around very nervously, grapes in hand, when they saw that Rosemarie and her men had been captured.

It seemed the people of That Village already knew that Rosemarie's grape wine was being made by ordinary, sweaty men.

"Shoot...we were finally found out, huh?" "Gah...and it was selling so well, too..." "Hey, what are we gonna do?"

I could hear everything they were saying.

I cleared my throat, then gently swirled the wineglass I had seized from Rosemarie, and let out a sigh at the sweet smell that wafted up.

"So, Miss Rosemarie, I find it quite strange that you could cover all the wine production for That Village by yourself. The numbers clearly don't add up, and there's no way you should have the free time to help with sales, too."

"...No, well, that's, how should I say...um..." Rosemarie was stammering incoherently.

"And what's worse, Rosemarie, how can you drink this wine, which you forced these men to produce, like it's so delicious? Don't you feel the least bit guilty?"

"Oh, not really. I drink the stuff that I squish-squashed a long while ago."

"The stuff? A *long while* ago?"

"...Crap."

"....."

And there we have it.

I brought the wine to my mouth.

“...What is the meaning of this?! In other words, that’s...? This! Rosemarie’s wine is...! Are you telling me those filthy men are the ones who squish-squashed it?!”

The chieftain of This Village was shouting with rage in his voice. A short while later, the other villagers began making a fuss, too. The agitation of the people of That Village gradually infected them.

“...*Tch*. What’s a little production fraud? You annoying fools...” Rosemarie murmured.

“Hey, I heard that! Sure enough, this little girl’s been making fools of us!”

“...Humph. And here I thought you were a fan.”

“This wine and that wine are different! I only bought from That Village’s in the first place because I thought that you had squish-squashed the grapes, Rosemarie!”

“That’s creepy.”

Extremely creepy!

The village chieftain didn’t seem to think so, though, and was red in the face like a drunk. “It’s not creepy! Don’t joke around, missy!”

He snatched a handful of grapes from a nearby villager and threw them at Rosemarie. Most of them hit her dead on. The few that missed hit the burly men beside her or me, splattering us all with juice.

“...Huh?” *Why do I have to sustain damage, too?*

Seeing Rosemarie soaked with juice stoked the fires of rage within the residents of That Village.

“Hey, you! What are you doing to Rosemarie?!” “Stop screwing around, old man!” “Die!” The people of That Village did as the village chieftain had done and threw grapes at the people of This Village.

From that point, the situation quickly devolved. Trapping Rosemarie, myself, and the burly men in the middle of the road between them, the residents of That Village and This Village began pelting grapes at one another.

I’m sure they were attempting to target the opposing

village. However, every missed throw hit us directly, since we were stuck between them. It was a mess.

“.....”

Why did I have to get caught up in all this?

I took another sip of wine.

Ah, it is delicious.

“...What should we do about this?”

“.....”

We were soon completely soaked with juice.

My irritation swelled with every burst grape until I didn't care about anything anymore. The blood was rushing to my head, and before I knew it, I had my wand out.

I felt a little hot, and I was probably getting a bit drunk.

“...Hoh-hoh! Oh-hoh-hoh! So that's how it's gonna be...? Everyone's dead set on making a fool outta me?”

Then I waved my wand.

I focused all my magic and flung the fruit that flew at me back where it had come from, increasing the velocity tenfold. Taking sip after sip of wine, I mercilessly peppered the residents of both This Village and That Village with grapes like bullets.

“Ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Well now, who on earth could this girl be, laughing like a demon as she rains unbridled fury over the villagers?

That's right. She's me.

Well then.

I was later told about the incident, but the truth is, I had no memory of it. Though I think I can be certain of the fact that such a debacle did occur.

I awoke with a headache beneath a dazzlingly bright blue sky, and when I sat up, I saw the fallen people from both villages covered in grapes and a bewildered Rosemarie muttering to herself with tears in her eyes, “I'm sorry, I won't do it again.”

I asked the frightened girl what had happened and learned of the scene I had caused. The fact is that my memories abruptly cut off after I had hauled her out of the warehouse and that, when I came to, I was beneath the blue sky. Looking at the present condition of things, though, it seemed certain that, just as she said, there had been a grape fight.

“...Ugh. My head hurts. It feels like it’s splitting open.”

I stood up, cradling my head, and staggered toward the village chieftain’s house.

There was no way I could stomp grapes while I was in this much pain. Well, since all of the villagers were out cold and covered in grape bits, I had no reason to. Plus, there weren’t any grapes left. They were all smashed on the ground.

Let’s hurry up and get out of here while everyone except Rosemarie is unconscious.

.....

They would probably hate me no matter how many grapes I stomped, and I was sure I had done plenty to deserve their scorn, even if I couldn’t remember anything.

Well, I should have been happy that I got out of doing something annoying.

“...My head hurts.”

After changing clothes at the village chieftain’s house, I got on my broom and flew off, still reeking of grapes.

My first experience drinking alcohol had left me with nothing but a terrible headache and some hazy memories.



“Since then, every year around this time, our two villages throw grapes at each other.”

“Huh. Sorry, Grandpa. Why did your story end that way?”

The old man said matter-of-factly, “The grape fight we

had back then was surprisingly fun, so our two villages came to do this every year around harvest time as a way to relieve stress. And when we do, I don't know why, but our grape harvest increases, and our wine production goes up."

"Wow..." After nodding several times, the boy tilted his head. "Ah, hey. So whatever happened to Rosemarie...?"

"Oh, she's the Rosemarie who stomps grapes in That Village. After the incident, she finally went back to doing her own work, I hear. What a good girl."

"And she's still the grape-stomping maiden?"

"Yep."

"Isn't she in her thirties?"

"She's aging like a fine wine."

"....."

The old man couldn't hold back his tears at the sad reality of what had happened to Rosemarie.

"Well, that's the story of the tradition our two villages have upheld for the past decade."

The boy nodded in understanding, then cocked his head again. "By the way, Grandpa, what's with that wine bottle you're holding?"

It was different than the one the chieftain had been clutching in the story.

Top Quality Wine from This Village

I made this with all my hatred and irritation.

ORIGIN: THE ASHEN WITCH ELAINA

So read the label, on which was printed a picture of a girl stomping grapes with a hateful grin on her face.

"Oh, this? This here...this is wine made by the witch from the story I just told you."

"You're not going to drink it?"

"That's right. It would be a waste."

An immeasurably wicked smile and an adorable face. That, plus the image of her actually stomping the grapes, made the wine sell for an absurd sum, yet for some reason,

people still bought it.

In the end, the Ashen Witch's grape wine, marketed as a top-quality vintage, had sold out in a flash.

Reasoning that it would be a waste of a one-time opportunity not to get one, the village chieftain had quietly purchased a bottle. Even now, he takes good care of it, not daring to actually drink the wine. They say he treasures that bottle above all else.

As for the current status of that particular vintage, owing to its traditional craft and limited production run, it is seldom found in the hands of any but the most avid enthusiasts and carries an exceptional price tag.



CHAPTER 5

Object Lessons: The Clever Master and the Cheeky Pupil

I'm Elaina! Apprentice Witch Elaina!

Right now, I'm training to become a witch, and I live with my teacher, Miss Fran!

My teacher is known as the Stardust Witch, and she's apparently a really big deal! She has long hair that's black as night and shines beautifully when it catches the light. She has kind eyes, and she's gracious as well! Most people with great personalities are incompetent and useless, but that's not the case for Miss Fran. She's totally flawless, beyond excellent, and an impeccable, perfect human being!

Of course, since I'm studying under such a wonderful teacher, I must be a perfect student as well...truly!

I'm kidding, by the way.

Mostly regarding the description of my teacher.

"....."

Well then, allow me to move on and tell you the truth.

The woman I call my teacher is always slacking off and messing around. Today, she surprised me by saying something like, "Elaina, what are you doing? Oh? Working on a new spell? Wow. Amazing. You really study hard!" Just when I thought she was going to give me a word of advice, she said, "Well, do your best!" and started reading a book.

When I first began my training, I was confused by her carefree attitude and got all fired up, thinking, *Oh, is she doing what I think she is? She's testing my independence, isn't she? All right then, I'll do my best!* The truth was, though, that she had agreed to teach me only as a favor to my parents.

So knowing this, how should I describe my dear teacher?

Well, for every time she says, “Elaina, let me help you with your training,” there’s another when she comes to show me a new spell like a normal teacher and then... “Elaina. Let me—oh, a butterfly...oh-ho-ho...” ...she just disappears to parts unknown.

She often irritates me by saying things like, “Elaina, I’m hungry.”

In short, the person I call my teacher is, to put it nicely, the embodiment of the words *wild* and *free*. To put it not so nicely, she’s a total ditz.

“By the way, what kind of potion are you making?”

She’s also terribly fickle.

All of a sudden, Miss Fran poked her head out from beside me and stared at the various ingredients sitting on the table and the small flask containing a blue potion.

“.....”

I always, always found myself on the receiving end of her flights of fancy. “This is a breathe-life-into-objects potion. I just whipped it up for fun.”

“Breathe-life-into-objects...? What kind of effect does it have?”

“When you apply the liquid in this flask to an object, it gains the ability to talk to you. Actually, I’ve already finished the proof of concept.”

For example, if you put it on a pen, the pen will cry out, “Thanks for always gripping me so tightly! Oh-ho-ho!” If you put it on a dust cloth, you might be surprised when it says something like, “Now, this is just between you and me, but I’m not a dust cloth, I’m a towel! Oh, I’m so dirty...”

By the way, when I applied it to a scrub brush, it whispered, “Brushie is so dirty...”

Oh my.

I had successfully created an amazing potion that would allow people to communicate with everyday objects. It was an accidental invention but one that seemed surprisingly monetizable.

“...That’s wonderful!” My teacher was quiet for a moment, then she said something strange. “By the way, Elaina, actually, I’ve heard of a village in this area that’s having some trouble that might be solved if the people there could talk to objects.”

“Oh?”

What an oddly specific problem. Exactly what kind of trouble are they having that could be solved by talking to objects? I’d certainly like to meet these people and ask them a few questions.

“Incidentally, I’ve heard that the villagers will bake delicious bread for whoever helps them out.”

“Wow...”

That’s got to be the most blatant lie I’ve ever heard.

“So, Elaina, won’t you lend me that potion for a day?”

“What are you going to do if I lend it to you?”

“Isn’t that obvious? I’ll get you as much exquisite bread as you could desire!”

“.....”

Her statement reeked of falsehood, and I frowned. “Well then, tell me the location of that village. I’ll go and get the bread myself.”

“I can’t do that. The people of that village don’t trust anyone but me.”

“Huh? You mean someone besides me is foolish enough to trust you?”

“That’s mean.”

It’s not mean at all.

It’s been almost a year since I joined you, so I think I sort of understand what you’re planning. I bet you intend to head over to a nearby village and sell my potion for a high price. You’ll make a killing and use some of the money to buy me lots of bread.

What a clever plan.

“Come on, Elaina, you can trust me. If I go, we can get lots of tasty bread!”

“.....”

Despite how well I knew the depths of Miss Fran's mind, I didn't feel like challenging her. Neither could I muster up the energy to bluntly reject her suggestion. It would just have been a pain to try, and besides, no matter the situation, it didn't change the fact that Miss Fran was going to take a special trip to a nearby village to buy bread for me.

This was extremely rare behavior for the kind of freewheeling, fickle person who I've painted a picture of so far.

“...Go ahead.”

I surrendered the small flask and the magical blue liquid sloshing about inside to my teacher.



So.

That evening.

“I'm back, Elaina!”

Miss Fran returned.

“Oh, welcome...back...?”

What's going on here? Miss Fran was holding only a single loaf of bread. And it was plain white bread. And it had gone cold. It looked awful.

She got me all excited by saying she would bring back loads of tasty bread, so what's the meaning of this?

“Oh, I'm sorry, Elaina. For various reasons, I could only get this. By the way, I used up most of your potion.”

Apparently.

“.....Huh?”

I took the flask back from Miss Fran. Sure enough, it was nearly empty. Only enough remained to tint the base of the flask.

I found her words awfully suspicious. Looking carefully, I

could see breadcrumbs stuck all around her mouth. Her whole body smelled like bread. I was ready to drop the hammer and pronounce her guilty.

“Oh, Elaina? Don’t tell me you doubt me... I’m not lying! Really, really, this is all the bread I got.”

“And why is that?”

“Well, I can’t tell you, for various reasons.”

“Why did you use up most of my potion?”

“There are various reasons for that, too.”

How are the words various reasons so highly convenient?

Well, liars are easy to sniff out. And my teacher and I were apparently very similar people.

Our methods of lying bear a striking resemblance.

Maybe because we’ve spent a lot of time together?

“.....”

Well, in any case, it had become clear that Miss Fran was very similar to me in the moment she handed me the flask.

And I’m not so foolish that I wouldn’t have thought up a counterplan against this obvious development.

So I sprung the trap that I had laid.

Slowly swirling the small flask that I was holding, I asked, “Little flask, little flask, what did Miss Fran get up to while I wasn’t looking?”

The flask answered, “Oh, miss, this witch, she exchanged the potion that was inside me for a large quantity of bread in a nearby village. Then, on the way home, she somehow ate ten whole loaves, saying, ‘It should be fine if I eat just one...’ again and again.”

“Seriously?”

“Yep. She’s really unbelievable!”

I nodded.

Flasks are objects, too.

If you put the potion in them, they can talk. That’s how it works.

So then...

"Well, miss? Do you have anything to say to me?"

But Miss Fran just darted her eyes around awkwardly as sweat beaded on her forehead, and she didn't respond. She was just like an inanimate object.

I wonder if she'll talk if I pour some potion on her...



CHAPTER 6

Sweet Treats and a Novice Traveler

The sounds of trumpets and accordions rang out loudly through the boisterous town square. There was no sense of restraint in the clamor, which cracked and shrieked terribly. The cacophony was drowning out the commotion.

Across from where the people of the country had gathered in pursuit of the noise, street musicians watched the passersby with pasted-on smiles and could sometimes be seen lowering their gazes to the instrument cases by their feet, their faces growing momentarily serious.

The contents of their cases, mouths open wide to the crisp air, were never more than a few coins.

“.....Hahh.”

I let out a single sigh from where I was seated on a bench.

This country was beautiful, with its white buildings all in a row. It was satisfying just to loiter for a while. The piercing music and the tumult of shoppers weren't really a good match for the scenery, but oh well.

Actually, this place was apparently famous as a land of celebrities, where high-ranking people accounted for the majority of the population. Sure enough, the city outside this plaza was mostly enveloped in a calm atmosphere. Or rather, since imposing groups of soldiers visibly patrolled the streets, it came off as rather strict. Anyway, aside from this one section, there was no doubt that overall the town was shrouded in silence.

The noisiness of the plaza could be attributed to the outsiders gathered here.

This was an amazing place, popularly known as Sweets City. In fact, the open plaza was overflowing with shops

selling macarons, chocolates, waffles, and all kinds of goodies. Specialty shops lined the streets end to end.

It seemed that the confections made here were popular elsewhere as well, and for that reason, merchants and travelers from faraway countries, as well as many sightseers and tourists, were gathered here, all buying treats.

Either for resale or their own consumption.

“...Oh-ho-ho-ho.”

Seated on the bench, I looked to my side and saw my bag, crammed full of sweets. I had bought as many as I could, using up most of the money I had on hand.

Maybe because the prices were aimed at outsiders, most of the goodies had been ridiculously expensive, but the reviews were all top-notch. They looked as delicious as the price tags would suggest. From what I've heard, any kind of confection will melt in your mouth as long as it's made with a bunch of high-quality ingredients. I just hoped they lived up to their exorbitant prices.

“Miss! My, my, your shoes are dirty! How about a shoe shine?”

“.....”

Any place where lots of visitors gather also becomes a popular hangout for weird people, like this bootblack trying to earn small change.

There was no need to worry, though. With folks like that, if you show them your (spare) empty wallet, they'll usually walk away without another word.

It's especially effective if you add the word *Sorry*.

“...Tch.”

By the way, sometimes people were rude and clicked their tongues, regardless of whether I said *Sorry* or not. I didn't really care for them.

“.....”

The city was full of celebrities, but of course, there were people in this country going hungry on a daily basis.

There seemed to be a wide disparity between rich and poor.

I could see the figure of a child weaving through the breaks in the hustle and bustle, walking around selling unremarkable fruit. She was dressed in tattered clothes, with a sign hanging from her neck that read ULTRA-HIGH-QUALITY FRUIT. ONE GOLD PIECE EACH.

There were also the bootblack boys. They didn't even appear to be of working age yet.

Then there were the street musicians, making their awful din. Their instruments were so beat up, they couldn't play properly.

This marketplace for tourists was also a den of opportunity for the city's poor.

“.....”

The majority of the visitors didn't so much as look at them. I could even see some people who turned them away with irritated expressions, as if the mere sight of them was a bother. It seemed cold, but that was the most common response. Travelers accustomed to wandering the world showed no interest in the poor urchins.

“...Hmm.”

That made it all the more obvious when a novice traveler showed up.

“My, what lovely music! Listen to that authentic street sound, it's the best! It makes our heart pound more than any other music in the world! We are deeply moved!”

There was a girl dancing euphorically in front of the aforementioned street performers, dropping gold coins from her wallet. She was a blond, wearing excessively showy, Gothic-style clothes, carrying a muted green rucksack on her back, with a beret on her head. She was a strange girl, who called herself “We.”

It seemed she was not an accomplished traveler, as she was running down the list of things that first-timers are

sure to do.

First, she paid the street performers right away. Novices have this idea that no matter what kind of music it is, they have to pay the moment it reaches their ears. I was like that once, too.

“My, my! A girl this young being forced to work... How brave! One gold piece for a fruit, hmm? All right, I’ll take all of them, please!”

If they see a pitiful child selling fruit, of course they’ll buy it. Whenever novices find themselves in the presence of a downtrodden child, the value of their money suddenly takes a nosedive, creating a localized deflationary spiral that results in the loosening of purse strings and substantial losses. I was like that once, too.

“Huh? A shoe shine? My, my! We were actually just thinking about how dirty our shoes are!”

Naturally, they also get their shoes polished unnecessarily. The exhilaration of arriving in a new country makes them feel as if trivial things are suddenly urgent matters. I was like that once, too.

In that way, a novice traveler will burn through their funds in no time. Their sense of value, once things spiral out of control, won’t normalize until they hit rock bottom.

Speaking of which, this girl’s rock bottom arrived very quickly.

“Oh? I’m all out of money... And I had quite a few gold pieces to start with, too...”

However, she was quite composed for being flat broke.

“Oh well. I guess I’ll go on a sweets tour for now. Hello, you there, in the shop. I’ll take one of each pastry. Everything, from right to left, please.”

The shopkeeper’s eyes went wide at her imposing attitude and her order, but he packed up the goods as requested.

By the way, the cost was apparently “Ten gold pieces.” I’m sure that’s what I heard. A ludicrous price.

"Of course. Please accept these."

The girl with the haughty bearing handed the shopkeeper ten pieces of unremarkable fruit, as if the trade were completely natural.

The shopkeeper was understandably shocked by her proposal, and his expression hardened as if to say, "*What are you talking about?*"

"Don't you see? We just purchased these fruits for ten gold pieces, which means that they have a value of ten gold pieces, right? So please accept them in exchange for these sweets."

"....."

The shopkeeper was silent for a moment, but before long, he shouted, "Oh noooooo! I found another wicked woman! Everyone, let's get her!"

At his cry, the music fell silent, the chatter stopped, and men dressed in chef's clothes came flying out of every shop on the street, launching themselves at her.

"Huh? Huhhh? Hey! What is this?! Stop it!"

She was quickly apprehended and pinned to the ground by the men, her cheeks pressing against the cobblestones.

"Another wicked woman, huh?!" "Sounds like you were going around ripping off our shops with your wicked ways, weren't you?!" "Gimme a break!" "We won't give in to your threats!" "Heh-heh-heh...you got quite a nice body, don'cha...?" "How about we make you *pay* for your insolence?! Heh-heh-heh-heh..." "Heh-heh..." "Hee-hee-hee..."

Geez.

What a disturbing situation.

"What are you all doing?! We simply tried to purchase some sweets!"

"Shut up!" One of the shopkeepers who had come running looked down at the girl severely. "We know that you ripped off our shops using the same dirty tactic several days ago! Did you think we would let you exchange cheap

fruit again this time? As if! It's execution for you!"

"Execution?! What?! You can't be serious!"

"Heh-heh...that's...well." The man fixed his gaze on her chest.

She followed his gaze, noticed the men's eyes glinting, then finally seemed to grasp her situation.

Her face went bright red, and she screamed.

"I've got it! You're all planning to have your way with me, right here, right now, aren't you?!"

"Huh...? Now? No, no, no." "Of course we wouldn't do it right here, right now. Have some sense!" "We wouldn't do that, no matter what."

"Stop it! We are not that type of girl!"

"What type of girl would that be?" "What is this girl saying?" "I guess she's an idiot?"

She had muddied the waters a bit, but that didn't change the lady's predicament. The men began tying a rope around her. If no one did anything, it seemed they were going to drag her into a nearby shop and assault her.

"....."

Ugh, I can't just watch.

I stood, picked up a yellow macaron, and after tossing it into my mouth, went and blocked the men's way.

"Hello there. What seems to be the problem?" I chewed as I spoke.

One of the men looked at me and tilted his head, "Who are you supposed to be? A traveler?"

I nodded. "Yes. I'm a traveling witch. I've been watching the situation from that bench over there for a while now... Did she commit some sort of scandalous crime?"

"That's right. This person here is a wicked woman who's been ripping off shops in this area for the past few days."

"Hmm."

"The rumors are going around. I hear she's a dirty thief who snatches all of our wares without paying a single coin, using fruit that she bought nearby in exchange!"

"Uh-huh. And that's why you arrested her? For trying to trade fruit for sweets?"

I was starting to understand, and the blond girl yelled at me, "It was a misunderstanding! We were merely trying to barter the fruits we had purchased for ten gold pieces!"

Quite reasonable.

"I saw the whole scene. She really did buy the fruit at an exorbitant price from the little girl selling it and then thought that she could exchange it for sweets. She's just an idiot. She's not a wicked woman or anything, and I'm not even sure she has the brains to carry out a scam like that."

"...Don't you all think you're being a bit harsh? Come on now."

"That said, everyone, you told me that there's a rumor going around about a wicked woman, but don't you have any information about the criminal's appearance?"

I put the question to the shopkeepers, ignoring their victim's interjection, and the men stammered, "Um..." then began discussing it all at once.

"Come to think of it, I feel like the wicked woman who came to my place was a little younger than you..." "She wasn't blond." "I think she had black hair?" "Her boobs were also a little smaller." "I feel like she also acted a little more calmly..."

I see, I see.

"Well then, it's quite clear this woman isn't the one you're looking for, so please release her. If you don't, I'll call someone."

That said, there are enough onlookers already that there's no need to call anyone. We're in a highly trafficked public square at a busy time of day. Our dispute is attracting an uncomfortable amount of attention, and everyone is listening.

From the perspective of the people around us, who didn't know much about the situation, this spectacle must have looked as if a group of men without any integrity had

unjustly captured a girl, and a witch had stepped in to stop them. Everyone, from the foreign merchants to the celebrities and sightseers who had come to the plaza to buy sweets, was glaring coldly at the men.

“...Urgh.” The shopkeepers flinched.

They seemed to have realized that there was not a single sign the situation would be changing in their favor. Loosening the rope that bound the girl, they assumed the bearing of people with some common sense, and one of them said, “...W-well. From now on, you need to buy things with money, not fruit, understand?” Hastily pushing the crowd aside, the men returned to their respective places of business.

“.....”

Not having fully digested the situation, the dazed girl slumped down on the spot and looked up at me. “Um... thanks...?”

“Don’t mention it. What’s your name?”

I extended a hand, and she gripped it lightly, with some hesitation.

“Sabine. That’s our name.”

“Is that so? Well, I’m Elaina. The Ashen Witch, Elaina.”

By the way, I recognize I’m changing the subject, but the wicked woman the men were talking about earlier...

Who on earth could she be?

That’s right. She’s me.



“Huh? Sorry, we are a bit hard of hearing. Come again?”

Well, I had thought it would be a bit of a waste to part then and there, so I was sipping coffee across from the girl in a café in a stylish and quiet corner of the neighborhood, a little ways away from the plaza, trying my best to explain the situation to Sabine.

Of course, it was my treat.

Because she had gone through such an ordeal after being mistaken for me, you see. It was also a chance to apologize.

"So as I said before, I'm the one they're searching for. I'm the one who's been ripping off the sweets shops in town. So I'm sorry. It was my fault."

I wouldn't have thought such a happy-go-lucky person actually existed, someone who would try to purchase candy with fruit. I hadn't even considered it a possibility.

Actually, I had originally meant to hand over a little bit of money along with the fruit, but...somehow or other, it seemed the fruit had walked off on its own.

"Why did you do such a thing...? Do you lack the money to buy sweets?"

"No, I have money. I just didn't feel like paying, so I didn't."

"Well! How arrogant."

"No, no. I'd like you to say that it's humble instead."

"But aren't you fooling people and taking their things? That's awful. How can you be so calm when you're acting like that?" Sabine glared at me.

I turned my eyes away as if to escape her. "Well... regarding that matter, you see, there's a deeper reason."

"Oh. What?"

"You want to hear?"

"I'd like to know."

Well, that's just perfect.

"By the way, Sabine, do you have some time right now?"

"We are a traveler."

"Meaning?"

"We have nothing but time."

"Oh-ho."

In short, you have plenty of time but no coin to speak of.

In that case, it's even more perfect.

We walked a short distance from the café, flew tandem on my broom over the roofs of all the houses, and arrived at the back gate of the city.

In contrast to the front gate, which was richly adorned, this entrance was rather plain and only just wide enough for a single cart to pass through. I had found it on the first day I arrived in the city while killing time flying around on my broom.

“Here, take a look at that.”

As we peered at the gate from the roof of a nearby house, we could see many of the merchants of the city meeting with a horse-drawn cart.

“You finally made it. Thanks, as always.”

The driver bowed slightly then got down off his cart. He began unloading packages one by one.

“I brought more today. As you can see, they’re all defectives. I did my own examination of sorts, so I don’t think there’s any you can’t use, but—”

One of the merchants peered into a package. It was full of essential ingredients for the making of confections. Fruits and butter, sugar and milk, flour and cocoa.

“What is that stuff?” Next to me, Sabine angled her head in confusion.

“It’s just as the merchant said. They’re defective products. For example, things that were thrown away because of some flaw in the manufacturing process, or things that don’t taste quite right... It’s a jumble of failures. Of course, they’re not high-quality products.”

“...Wait a second. The people of this city insisted that they make their sweets from carefully selected ingredients.”

“Right. Well, to be sure, they are carefully selected.”

Selected for being defective.

“But the artisanal sweets made in this city are famous for their flavor, you know? That’s why we visited this country. We couldn’t resist after hearing the stories.”

"I've been on a sweets-buying tour for several days now and have tossed many a treat into my mouth, and they all had very ordinary flavors. You can eat one if you'd like." I took a macaron out of the bag I had been carrying and handed it to Sabine.

She paused a moment before taking it then popped it into her petite mouth and chewed.

"....."

She made an extremely ambivalent expression.

"...It's...tasty, but we wouldn't pay a gold piece for this."

"Right?" *It's worth a copper at most.* "The people who come to this country to buy sweets are just being manipulated by the promotional line about top-quality ingredients."

"....."

So when you get right down to it, to put it clearly and concisely—"I've been buying sweets with fruit and small amounts of money, indirectly alluding to the fact that I know what's really going on here."



"...That's a shock. And here we were expecting to find the perfect sweets. Here of all places...ordinary cheap stuff...? Third-rate goods...? We would at least like them to use some restraint if they're going to humiliate us!"

"You're upset, aren't you?"

"Of course we are! What is this? They're making fools of visitors! Even worse, why are rich people selling cheap wares? We don't understand it!"

We had returned to the café. Sabine was pounding on the table wildly, cheeks puffed out in rage. The second coffee of the day was electrifying her spirit.

I took my cup in hand. "Well, I think it's actually the opposite—it's probably not that they're selling cheap things

for high prices because they're rich but rather that the people here got rich because they've been able to sell cheap things for high prices in a skillful way."

"...What do you mean?"

"Just what I said."

The merchants had been able to bring great wealth and prestige to their city by having the audacity to sell cheap goods for high prices. I suspected the adults sold cheap confections as top-quality items, used needy children to sell fruit, got rich, and were availing themselves of the elegant celebrity lifestyle.

However, there was no doubt that there was, in fact, a wealth gap, and there were people earning their daily income through methods like shining shoes, street performance, and selling fruit at the behest of the rich.

I brought my coffee to my lips. The slightly bitter taste spread through my mouth. "Things aren't always as they seem, Sabine. I expect you don't really understand that yet, since you've only just begun traveling, but the world is full of people who try to earn money by deceiving others."

She looked a little surprised. "How do you know that we just began traveling?"

"Because someone accustomed to it doesn't buy fruit for exorbitant prices from peddler girls. They also shine their own shoes." *Sometimes they pay money to street performers, but at the very least, they don't throw gold coins at them.*

"Huh... But weren't those children down on their luck? If carefree travelers like us don't help them, then... Especially the girl selling fruit—she looked like she would be on the brink of death if we didn't extend a helping hand, didn't she?"

I slowly shook my head. "Even if you give them money for fruit there, it doesn't help the children at all. The truth of the matter is that the adults are the ones pulling the strings. The spectacle of poor, unfortunate children walking

around selling fruit is enough to elicit tears from outsiders, isn't it? This country aside, there are nefarious adults all over the world who earn money by exploiting children. They greedily scoop up the majority of the cash the kids collect, leaving only a tiny amount in the children's hands."

"....."

"If you really want to help the children, don't pay them. If nobody buys from poor children, then nobody will force poor children to sell things in the first place."

At most, the act of buying fruit from pitiful children is nothing more than a temporary salve for your peace of mind.

"...Is that so?"

I wonder what she could be thinking.

She was just staring at the cup in her hands, furrowing her brow.

I had also been extremely shocked when I realized that the evil adults behind the children were thriving.

"Why did you start to travel?" I posed the question, and Sabine suddenly broke into a smile.

"In our country, there are no sweets per se. So we thought we would go on a sweets tour. That was just a few days ago."

"Oh."

"That way, we could study the treats we discover in the countries to which we travel. We think we would like to sell sweets in our own country."

"Uh-huh."

"...But it seems we haven't been able to learn anything useful at all here."

"But you've learned a bit more about the traveler's mindset, haven't you?"

"Probably, yes."

"....."

"....."

Then the two of us sipped our coffee for a little while and

passed the time in silence.

"Pardon the intrusion! We are soldiers of the realm. We're going to take the liberty of searching this establishment."

Our quiet time abruptly came to an end.

Dangerous-looking soldiers burst through the door, shouting. Their thick-soled shoes stomped through the café.

"Wh—wh-wh-what is this? Hey. They look really upset. Was there some sort of incident?"

I leaned close to Sabine, who sat facing me, and whispered, "They're searching for the wicked woman who's been popping up for the last few days. To them, the scoundrel is nothing but a nuisance."

"...Isn't that...you?"

I put one finger to my lips. "Shh!"

"No, not *shh!*!"

"It's fine. They shouldn't be able to find me out." I took my wand out under the table and applied a little bit of a spell to my hair. "When I was working my way through the sweets shops, I changed my hair color like this."

Just for a second, I colored my hair black and then quickly returned it to its normal ashen gray. Of course, when I was really in disguise, I didn't just change my hair but my clothes as well, so there was no way they would find me out.

That's why, ultimately—

"Excuse me. Recently, we've received reports that a woman is committing evil deeds in this area. Do you know anything about that? She looks something like this."

Of course, I was able to remain calm even when the soldier came over to us.

The likeness that the soldier was holding depicted a young woman with jet-black hair. She wasn't dressed like a witch in the least. It was just a drawing of a plain girl with black hair.

I shook my head stubbornly.

"You don't? How about you?"

Sabine was apparently a poor liar.

"Huh? Ah, um..."

"....." I stepped on her foot beneath the table. "You don't, do you?"

"Eee! N-n-nope!"

The soldier who had approached our table nodded slowly and suspiciously. "Hmm, is that so...?"

I would have been extremely happy if he had left at that point, but somehow it seemed that had not been his only point of business, as he showed me a second poster.

"By the way, as a matter of fact, it seems the princess of the neighboring country has gone missing recently... I don't suppose you know anything? She looks like this."

"....."

Oh, how surprising!

The picture I was shown depicted a lovely blond girl. Smiling gently at the camera, she was quite beautiful. If she had donned a beret and Gothic-style clothing, she would have been the spitting image of the person sitting across the table from me.

"By the way, her name is apparently Princess Sabine."

"....."

Meaning it was Sabine herself.

"They say she disappeared several days ago. They're afraid that she might have been abducted or something, so we're making the rounds searching for her here as well. If you have any information, please let us—huhhh?"

Just then, Sabine's and the soldier's eyes met, and the soldier held the likeness up next to her face, looking back and forth between them over and over again.

While he was at it, he also looked sidelong at me over and over again.

If he thought Sabine was the missing princess, from the soldier's perspective, how on earth did he see me, the person with her?

.....

Ah, this isn't good.

"You must have abducted Princess Sabine!"

"....."

I thought that would happen.

No helping it.

Since it's come to this—

I pulled my wand out from under the table.



I decisively tapped my wand on the floor of the café, and ivy undulated up from beneath it like a living creature, entangling the soldiers.

Immediately thereafter, I ran out of the café, leading Sabine by the hand, but of course, more soldiers were lying in wait for us there. I had left the interior of the café full of ivy, so it was probably too late for explanations. I wrapped all the soldiers outside the café in ivy, too, and escaped toward the town plaza.

We disappeared into the crowd, and I kept my composure as I continued pulling Sabine along.

"....."

Caught up in the moment, I had brought her royal highness in tow during my escape, but giving it some thought, I decided there was really no need for us to run away together.

"Thank you, Elaina, for taking care of us."

"Eh, ah, sure. Right, that's exactly what I did." *That's a lie.* "So you're the princess of some other country?"

"Yes. We started a sweets tour so that we might bring confections home to our country."

"....." *What is with that superficial motive?*

"But I never thought they would find out we were in this city... This is bad."

"Why don't you go back home?"

"We can't do that! There are no sweets there! For the sake of all the girls in our country, our journey must not end here!"

"By the way, what did you tell them when you left home?"

"....."

"I see."

The soldier had said that Princess Sabine had *gone missing*, so she had probably just slipped away on her own without saying anything. Recklessness can go too far.

"Well, what are you planning to do now?"

"Of course, we're going to continue traveling. We have only just begun our journey!"

"If you can make it out of this city, that is."

"That's right. That is a troubling point."

Already the news that Sabine has disappeared must be spreading among the soldiers. If she just waltzes up to the gate like this, I don't think they're likely to let her pass.

"We are begging you, Elaina. We will be certain to repay your kindness in full if you please, please get us out of here?"

"Hmm...well, I don't mind, but..."

"If we use the spell that you showed us earlier, I think the two of us can make it work somehow."

I've got a strange feeling about this.

"Well...probably, right...yeah..."

"What's that? You're not speaking clearly."

"As long as you're with me, I've got nothing but trouble."

"Well! How rude!"

Sabine was completely indignant. But, well, she was also the kind of person who has a hard time keeping up when the situation gets complicated, so I decided that the best course of action would be one that didn't give her the chance to speak at all.

Hmm-hmm-hmm.

"At this point we've got no choice. Let's use a bit of a

secret trick."

"A secret trick? What are you planning to do?"

"First off, a fantastic technique that will allow me to silence you."

Then, I pointed my wand at her.

"Stop, stop. We've got orders to search all luggage due to recent disturbances... Apparently, the woman who kidnapped the princess of a certain country has gone into hiding. Accordingly, we are searching all baggage—"

Being the middle of the day, a line had formed at the country's front gate (the ostentatiously decorated one), and soldiers were rummaging through the freight on every merchant's cart, checking to make sure two women hadn't slipped into one of them.

Soldiers were walking back and forth along the line, and they finally reached the tail end and came to where I was.

One of the soldiers crouched down in front of me.

Probably so he could make eye contact.

"...Hmm? Why are you leaving the city, young lady? Where's your mother?"

I was currently dressed as a very young girl of about nine years old. In one hand, I was holding my wand and, in the other, a stuffed teddy bear. I was clad in a Gothic-style dress.

Of course, I had the same ash-colored hair and lapis-colored eyes as always, but I looked about half my usual age. There was no way they would find me out.

"My mother is waiting for me outside the city," I answered him confidently.

"Huh. Is that so? So you're going through the gate alone. How brave! Want me to go with you?"

"No, thank you."

"Eh, ah, okay..."

"Hurry up and get us out of here!" came a small voice

from under my arm.

The spell to alter someone's appearance is very tiring. Furthermore, I was transforming Sabine's as well as my own. I was already totally exhausted just from waiting in line.

"You're really something, huh...you've got a sharp tongue." The soldier seemed to have too much free time on his hands. "By the way, that stuffed animal you're holding sure is cute."

"You think so? Her name is Sabine."

"Oh wow. She's got the same name as the princess we're searching for."

"That's right." I stealthily squeezed the stuffed animal tighter, preventing it from moving even a little, then laughed and said, "Maybe this teddy bear *is* Miss Sabine."

"Ha-ha-ha, imagine... Oh, look, little miss, the line's moving. Go ahead."

That was exactly the moment when the merchant in front of me left the city.

I bowed slightly to the soldier and walked toward the gate.

And then, we took our leave.

"Wow...that was easy, huh?" I murmured in a quiet voice that no one could hear.

"So easy," Sabine murmured from my arms.

You didn't even do anything!

In this way, Sabine and I slipped stealthily out of the country before parting ways. After that, I have no idea what kind of path the novice traveler followed.

However, I had a premonition that I was sure to meet her again somewhere.



When you really think about it, this was a bit of a pointless story about perpetrating a scam to escape a city that was running its own scam of a sweets monopoly.

There was no climax, there were no dramatic developments, only detached dialogue that's difficult to even recall.

Be that as it may, sure enough, immediately after I'd arrived in a certain country, I remembered the incident—the incident from a year earlier.

The cityscape was exceedingly ordinary, and neither the roads nor the plazas nor even the palace had a single feature warranting special mention. With not one thing you could call a defining characteristic, the city seemed very unlikely to leave an impression.

The population was neither large nor small, and it didn't appear to be prospering or failing. It was simply somewhere people lived, a place to pass by.

Despite all that, I had been invited to the palace in that country, and it was as I was being led through the reception room that I remembered the episode from the past.

"How do you find it? This country of ours."

Joining me in the reception room was the nation's princess.

A girl with blond hair whom I had met before someplace, sometime.

"It's ordinary," I answered her flatly.

She smiled and nodded.

"It is, isn't it? It's very ordinary."

Then she had sweets laid out on the table, completely burying it under all kinds of macarons, chocolates, waffles, and other similar treats.

"But we had a revelation while traveling. We're happier here than anywhere else precisely because of our 'normalcy.'"

"....."

"If there are children walking around in dirty clothes,

you'd think, *Oh, there's a wealth disparity here.* But strangely, if there are only people walking around in neat, clean clothing, you don't think anything of it. People have a tendency to only notice the bad things. Even when fresh, beautiful scenery meets the eye, if you look at it for a long time, it will fade and become ordinary."

"I suppose so. The scenery taken in by a traveler all looks beautiful, but that's because we're only in it for that moment."

"That's why we gave it some thought. When a country becomes completely ordinary, so much as to not leave an impression, that country must be very happy."

"....."

"There's no need to force ourselves to make local specialties or anything. I think that being ordinary is both the most difficult and most joyful feat."

"...So did you give up on popularizing sweets?"

She shook her head slowly at my inquiry.

"Right now, we're in the middle of distributing cookbooks across the country. If anyone could make whatever sweets they wanted, wouldn't that be a blessing?"

"Huh."

"We're preparing to do just that. We're in negotiations with nearby countries and have made requests to get the ingredients for making sweets to flow into our land. They're all defective and inferior goods, but if we can make effective use of them, I'm sure we can spread incredible confections throughout the country for reasonable prices."

"Wow."

I see, that's a clever way of doing things.

"So then, these sweets here are made with the discount ingredients?"

"Precisely."

"So I'm meant to be the taste tester."

"Precisely."

"....."

I feigned reluctance and took a single macaron in my hand.

It had a fresh yellow color, and when I tossed it in my mouth, the fragrance of lemon spread from the front of my mouth to the back of my throat. It was exactly the same flavor as when I had met her one year earlier in that city.

It was a nostalgic, calming flavor.

“How does it taste?”

I quickly swallowed and answered her with a smile.

“Ordinary.”



CHAPTER 7

Object Lessons: The Cheeky Pupil and the Living Objects

To my dear teacher:

Hello, miss, it's been a while.

Since I've been training in the forest not far from Robetta, it would be easy to come spend time with you and make my report directly, but it's a bit difficult for me to move from here—actually no, the truth is that, under present circumstances, I cannot leave, so I have decided to inform you via letter.

As I wrote in my progress report from several days ago, my dear pupil and your daughter Elaina made a “potion for talking to objects.” It was a magnificent thing.

She told me that she came upon it by accident, but even for an accidental product, this is a praiseworthy innovation.

However, although she is almost always calm and composed, she has a complex nature and tends to get carried away if I praise her even the littlest bit, so I didn't say much.

However...

That brings us to today, several days later.

“Miss, you know that potion for talking to objects? Well, that was kind of defective. I'm working on something even more amazing now. Won't you have a look?”

“Ah, sure... What kind of potion are you making?”

“An improved version of the other one. This time, the objects will assume human form.”

“Uh-huh...well then...”

“Sorry, but don't misuse this one, okay?”

"I won't. I learned my lesson last time."

"Good thing."

Miss, this is bad.

Elaina started getting carried away even though I didn't praise her much. And what does she mean, "the objects will assume human form"? I've never made such a potion myself.

To my dear number one pupil,

You don't need to do anything.

Leave her alone and it'll work itself out.

To my dear teacher:

Seriously?

Oh, just in case, I'm including a sample of the potion for talking to objects that Elaina made the other day. Please confirm.

To my dear number one pupil,

Seriously.

Also, I wonder if you could stop sending packages cash on delivery. It's annoying.

That said, what is with this flask? It talks. It's creepy. That child certainly has some strange interests, doesn't she?

To my dear teacher:

In that way, she is your spitting image.

To the person who was once my number one pupil,

I'm excommunicating you.

To my dear teacher:

Ah, wait a moment, miss! I'm sorry, I was just kidding.

To my dear teacher:

Being ignored has left me heartbroken.

To my dear teacher:

Miss? Miisss—
Hellooo...?

To my dear number one student,

By the way, how is Elaina? Is she still full of herself?

To my dear teacher:

Ah.
No, that turned out just as you said it would.



There were several problems with my first attempt at a potion for talking to objects.

First, it was difficult to store. Because containers are also objects, any flask I used to try to store the potion also

gained the ability to speak. It was terribly noisy and inconvenient. There was room for improvement.

Next, it wasn't always easy to tell whether the potion had taken effect or not. Rarely, in the case of untalkative objects, they wouldn't say anything, even when you applied the potion. Out of curiosity, I used the concoction on Miss Fran's pointy black hat, but perhaps it had a shy disposition, or maybe it just didn't want to talk to me—either way, the hat never said a single thing. I had no way of knowing whether the magic had an effect or not. There was room for improvement.

Since I was making a potion to converse with objects, the magic took liquid form. In the middle of one of my experiments, I spilled it all over the table and floor. It was awful, an absolute disaster. I'd prefer not to recall it. Here, too, there was room for improvement.

And so...

"Hmmm..." I was in the middle of bettering my acclaimed potion.

If I could make a superior version, I might become the kind of outstanding talent that surpassed my teacher... I entertained several daydreams to that effect while I worked.

I soon hit upon an idea that would clear up all the problems.

"A spell that would change objects into people...that's it! That would be best."

No doubt about it.

If it was a spell instead of a potion, there would be no danger of spilling it, and if I could give the target a human form, I could confirm visually whether the magic had taken effect.

Plus, if I made it into a spell, there would be no annoying voices from the flasks. There would be no need to store it.

Huh? Could I be...a genius...?

"This...could do it!"

I got to work as soon as I had made the decision.

I opened up the notes I had taken when I had accidentally created the potion before and settled into developing the spell.

Soon I had finished the prototype.

"Miss, you know that potion for talking to objects? Well, that was kind of defective. I'm working on something even more amazing now. Won't you have a look?"

When I went to Miss Fran, she looked a bit surprised, then started writing a letter to someone.



The spell was complete in a matter of days.

"I finished the spell I told you about earlier!"

Just after I had completed my work on the project, I caught Miss Fran fidgeting nervously in front of the mailbox.

She was repeatedly opening it, and as she peered inside, she asked, "Oh-ho. Well then, well then... What have you finished exactly?"

"Listen and be amazed. It's a 'spell for changing objects into people.' It's incredible."

"Ah...the spell you told me about earlier, huh? So you finished it?"

"Yes. It's incredible—take a look."

Then I fired off the spell.

A blast of light engulfed the mailbox, and it sparkled as it was hit by the magic.

After a short while, the box changed shape.

Into a cute girl.

"Hi. Nice to meet you. I'm Post. Thanks for always using me. By the way, Miss Stardust Witch, you've opened me up forty-two times today, but you still haven't gotten any mail?"

The girl looked up at Miss Fran with a smile.

"I see, this is..."

Miss Fran looked down at the girl with a truly complex expression.

As far as what I did after that...well, I might have gotten a little carried away. Maybe. Just a bit.

I cast the spell on many objects and ordered them to do my chores. For example, I turned a single plate into a human and ordered it to do the dishes and left the cleaning of my room up to an enchanted dust cloth.

I changed my grimoire into a person and had it explain sections I didn't understand.

I really lived my life just as I pleased.

Then, one day, it happened.

"Okay!"

I was trying to turn Miss Fran's mug into a human and have it pour coffee into my own mug while I sat in my chair, as usual.

I accidentally made a teeny little mistake.

I let the magic build up around my wand for too long instead of releasing it.

"...Ah."

The light surrounding the tip of the wand soon wrapped itself around the whole thing, changing it into a human.

"Oh-ho-ho-ho...I've been waiting for this day!"

A strange sight appeared before my eyes. An adult woman, a little older than me.

The woman who had been created from my wand grabbed me by both shoulders and leaned close to me. "Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho! Elaina. What a cute girl you are! The whole time that I've been working hard for you, I've wished and waited for the day I would become your friend. Geez, you're cute."

"Ah, okay...thanks, I guess."

"By the way, do you have a sweetheart?"

“I don’t, but—”

“Then be my sweetheart!”

“No! We’re both girls. And you’re not even human.”

“What are you saying? Love’s got nothing to do with gender!”

“Ah, wait—wah!”

The wand woman suddenly grasped my shoulders and pushed me down.

Wait just a minute! You’re not even human. Let’s address that before worrying about gender and so on.

I felt like there were several things I needed to say, but unfortunately, I wouldn’t get the chance.

The woman straddled me, wearing an ecstatic expression, her breath ragged.

Ah, this is bad.

“Don’t worry! I won’t hurt you!”

Then she grabbed both of my wrists with one hand and slowly and steadily lowered her face close to me.

A mage deprived of their wand is practically helpless. Since it was my very wand attacking me, I had an even bigger problem.

Ahh! Ow-ow-ow!

“Stop...hey, stop it—”

Then, just as she was about to kiss me, she suddenly reverted back into a wand.

“...Really. What are you doing, Elaina?”

When I looked past my wand, Miss Fran was standing there staring at me with an exasperated expression. “That was a close call. In several ways.”

“.....”

“Are you all right?”

I grabbed my teacher’s extended hand, and she pulled me up.

“I am now. Somehow...”

“That’s good.”

I was full of miserable feelings as I hastily put my very

disheveled attire back in order. This must have been some kind of lesson about getting carried away. I never imagined that I would get attacked by my own possessions.

Perhaps realizing what I was feeling, Miss Fran didn't admonish me but just had one thing to say. "People and objects are the same. There's no guarantee they'll always do as you expect."

And then she bonked me on the head.



To my dear teacher:

...So that's what happened, and since then, she hasn't used the spell for changing objects into humans.

To my dear number one pupil,

The next time I see my daughter, I'm going to smash that wand to bits.

To my dear teacher:

I've already done it.



CHAPTER 8

Ten-Year Ceasefire

The ground squelched and squished beneath my feet.

Rain had been pouring down hard over the region until this morning, and the dampness was sticking around, making the forest muggy.

Bathed in the light of the morning sun, the raindrops that slipped off the tree branches from time to time scattered sparkles as they fell before being absorbed by either the sodden ground or my pointy black hat.

The forest road was steamy, heat rising from it as in early summer.

It's so hot. Ugh, this is annoying.

"...Ughhh." The shadows of leaves swayed in the tepid breeze, dancing across the ground beneath my feet.

I was extremely reluctant to be walking through the forest feeling so unpleasant, but if I flew my broom in a situation like this and left the coverage of the trees, I was sure to get soaked by the leftover raindrops that got caught in the wind created by my broom's passing.

However, while that may have been the case, I was getting drenched with sweat the longer I walked, so it wasn't doing me any good.

"It's hottt..."

I was holding my wand in both hands, using my magic to conjure up a breeze.

"Ugh...it's not even cool..."

I didn't want to wear my robe on a day this warm. I had cast it off and wore only a shirt, a skirt, and my pointy black hat. In this outfit, someone would probably squint their eyes while looking at me, unsure if I was a witch or not.

To beat the heat, I was blasting myself with a breeze

from my wand, which was strong enough to cause my ashen hair to flutter up loosely as it brushed past the nape of my neck. Even so, my spirits did not brighten at all. Rather, my discomfort got worse and worse.

I hate the time after the rain in humid climates.

I just want to hurry up and get to the next country and relax and rest up at a nice inn.

Let me see...how much longer to my destination?

"...Hmm."

Apparently, I should arrive in about thirty minutes.

A sign reading THIRTY MINUTES TO CERIAL KINGDOM had been considerably placed beside the path.

TAKE A REST.

Just next to the sign was a small bench.

My goodness, that's a bit of a misplaced favor in this climate, though.

"....."

However, it seemed there did exist in this world some broad-minded individual who could patiently accept such a misplaced favor.

Idly loitering on the bench, fanning himself with a folding fan, was a lone man.

By the looks of him, he had been sitting there for quite a long time. The sweat spots on the shirt had formed an intricate pattern, and I could clearly make out the fatigue on his face. Appearance-wise, he seemed to be in his mid-thirties. A few streaks of silver were mixed into his black hair.

Is it possible he's been sitting here patiently for a very long time?

Incidentally, there was a huge quantity of water and food by his side, so it was possible that he was planning to sit here for a long time after this, too.

Well, I don't suppose that would be the case, huh?

Also, beside the man's feet sat some kind of strange

creature with fur like a mop.

Maybe his pet? It kinda looks like a big moss ball, though.

.....

"Are you a traveler?"

I spoke to the man once I had come as far as the side of the bench, conceitedly conjuring my own personal breeze all the while. I forced myself to put on an air of feeling slightly cool.

It was too hot for me to worry about someone else's comfort.

The man slowly shook his head in response to my question. "No. I'm from that country."

As he spoke, he pointed to the road I had just traveled, down which my footprints stretched into the distance.

At this point, absolutely nothing was visible down the road except for forest, but if you went way that way, there was the Mellnell Kingdom, where I had stayed until this morning.

By the way, there was nothing much there.

"If you're from that country, then...ah, you must be a merchant or something. Thanks for all your hard work."

"No. I'm not a merchant. I just live there. Also, I don't have any particular business in the Cerial Kingdom."

"...?" I tilted my head in confusion. "Well then, why are you in a place like this?"

"I'm waiting for someone."

"Oh. From the looks of it, the person you're waiting for has a very loose sense of timing."

Aren't you drenched in sweat?

"You're telling me. They're very bad with time."

"About how long have you been waiting?"

I was genuinely interested. There was no particular deep meaning to my question, and neither did I especially admire the patience of a person who would endure this heat, waiting for someone while getting soaked in sweat.

"I've been waiting here for over a decade," the man answered, and while that was cause for some concern, it was the next part that really worried me. "...and I'll continue waiting, as long as it takes."



"Of course, I've got a job, too, so I'm not here twenty-four-seven or anything. But when I have the time, I sit right here, just like this. I'm always here, waiting. I've watched the days and months go by for ten years, waiting."

My interest piqued, I had taken a seat on the bench, and the man had told me his name was Nord as he talked to me about this and that.

I gave my own name, dropping in the fact that I was a witch so there would be no confusion, and then asked with a tilt of my head, "Who are you waiting for?"

"My wife. She left and went to the country down the road ten years ago, but she never returned. I've been waiting here the whole time."

"Wouldn't it be better to go and meet her?"

But the man slowly shook his head.

"My nation and the one down the road were at war ten years ago, and since then, neither will have anything to do with the other. Even now, they won't open the gate if someone from our country goes there."

"So that's why you can't go."

"Right. That's why I've been waiting here."

For ten whole years?

No, rather...

"If she went there ten years ago, then that means—is she, you know, dead or something?"

"No. My wife is a witch. She went to fight that other country."

"....."

"I think I know what you want to say. If she hasn't come back after ten years of waiting, then she's probably dead. That's what you'd like to say, isn't it?"

I nodded.

"I think so, too. But as long as there's a chance that she's alive, I can't just give up on her, can I?"

"So that's how it is...?"

"That's how it is. We're married, after all."

"....."

I kept silent for a while, searching for the right words.

During that pause, the creature by the man's side stood up and began squirming restlessly.

"....."

Its mop-like hair wriggled and stretched, lifting up its round, mossy body, and it began crawling around on countless legs made of hair.

The hair-legs were longer than I was tall, so I, still seated on the bench, looked up at the creature's face—or the part that seemed most face-like anyway. I couldn't see any eyes. Just a round body, covered in dense hair.

"...Um, what is this creature? I've kind of been wondering about it this whole time."

The ball of dense hair stretched its legs out between me and the man and took a seat on the bench between us.

The man stroked the hairball by his side and said, "Ah, I was wondering when you'd ask. This is some sort of mysterious creature."

"Um, I can tell that by looking at it."

"Maybe so, but it's the thing that lives on this bench."

"Huh." I nodded without thinking, but when I gave it some more thought, I was completely confused. "Wait, what on earth...?"

It lives on the bench? Huh?

"The truth is, I don't really know anything about this creature either. When the war ended and my wife didn't come back, I came to wait on this bench, and from that day

onward, this creature has always been here. From morning to night, it's always right here."

"....."

"I think it might also be waiting for someone."

"...Might be, huh?"

"It's thanks to its company that I've been able to wait for my wife so patiently. For some reason, I feel peace of mind with it next to me, and the waiting hasn't seemed so bad."

As he spoke, the man stroked the ball of dense hair again.

It quivered slightly.

"...It doesn't like that?"

"No, that was a happy shake."

"....."

I mimicked the man and tried stroking the creature. As expected, it quivered again. I could feel the vibrations through the thick, matted hair.

"Oh, it doesn't like that."

"It looks like the same response as when you stroked it, though."

"I'm sure it looks that way to the untrained eye, but I can tell."

"So that's how it is?"

"That's how it is. We understand each other just like an old married couple."

"Since you've been together for ten years."

"....."

Then, while fanning himself with the folding fan, the man said softly, "And we'll continue being together. Why, I'd say, *I know everything there is to know about this thing...*"

The damp breeze blew between us, and the ball of dense hair trembled slightly.

I had absolutely no idea what emotion that signified.



After that brief interlude, I finally made it to the next country's gate.

However...

"Hmm...?"

It was strange. The scene before my eyes ran counter to the man's description.

"Welcome, Madam Witch! Are you a traveler from the country down the road?"

I was sure the fellow on the bench had told me the gate would be closed, but it was open just as one might ordinarily expect, and the guard was smiling from ear to ear when he greeted me.

"I am a traveler, but I'm not from that country."

"I see! And how many days will you be staying?" the guard asked. "We would be happy if you would stay at least three, if possible, but..."

"Hmm? Why?"

It was a strange request.

Why three days?

Then the guard said something else strange. "Because in three days' time, this country will no longer be at war!"

My head hurts.

After entering the country, I spent two days going around sightseeing. I had been asked to stay at least three days, and I had to admit I was curious.

The people here seemed to be eagerly awaiting the end of the war.

At last, an end to war!

The day we've awaited for ten years has finally come!

Finally, we can move forward!

Signs and slogans like these were on display all over town. There were so many that it was actually a little annoying.

By the way, why is the war ending in three days? In the

country I was just visiting, the war has been over for a long time. Why is it still going on here?

I wanted to go around asking this and that and actually did in order to kill time, but unfortunately, no one would answer me.

“Don’t worry, you’ll understand in three days,” they suggested.

“.....”

Then, before I knew it, the day of the ceasefire arrived. However, now that the day was here, I was at a loss.

“...Why?”

I absolutely did not understand.

The people were gathered in a plaza in the middle of town. It looked like they were all watching the center of the plaza with smiles on their faces, as if anticipating something spectacular.

There, in the middle of the onlookers, soldiers holding rifles had formed a ring. Each of them had the barrel of their gun pointed toward the center of the ring.

“.....”

However—

Why are there so many of those strange living balls of dense hair? What are a group of creatures like the one I met with the man on the forest road doing here, surrounded by soldiers?

To me, it looked like the people of this country had joined forces to persecute the poor things just like pilloried criminals.

The balls of dense fur were huddled close together, shaking.

“What on earth are those?”

When I tapped the shoulder of one of the people next to me watching the creatures and inquired, I received my answer right away, as if it were the most natural thing.

“What are they, you ask...? I thought everyone knew that they’re the witches from the other country.”

○

I finally got someone to tell me the truth about what had happened here ten years ago.

The effects of the war had finally reached the home front. A group of ten or so witches from the other country had formed an elite squad to strike at the heart of enemy territory.

They were opposed by the sole witch who lived in this nation. She was doomed to fail from the start.

The group of witches had overrun the countryside, demolishing buildings, destroying weapons, and snatching away the people's means of waging war, one after the other.

Driven into a corner, the people entrusted their futures to the lone witch.

"Is there no way to defeat such a large number of witches all at once?" they asked.

The lone witch, loving her home above all else, gave up her life to stop the enemy witches' attack.

She sacrificed herself and cursed them all, transforming them into those odd creatures.

This city had lost its only witch and, with her, their last ray of hope. As such, they were forced into a campaign of desperate defense. On the other side of the battlefield, the invaders had lost all their witches and did not want to risk a second attack.

In this way, the war naturally came to an end, and the two countries had nothing more to do with each other.

"By the way, those strange creatures have several peculiar characteristics."

"Oh?"

"They're less like animals and more like simple objects. They don't need to eat anything, and they can't die, no matter what."

"Meaning?"

"They remain calm even when drowning, and somehow they don't burn even when engulfed in flames. When you hit them with a volley, the bullets are spit back out of the ball of dense hair. They're practically immortal."

"....."

"It's like our city's witch devised a plan so that, no matter what happened, they would never be free from their war crimes. But there's an end to their immortality. There was a time limit on our witch's curse. Their immortality is supposed to wear off ten years after the curse was initially cast."

"...In other words, you mean..."

"That's right. Today marks the day that ten years have passed."

"....."

"That's why we're celebrating. That's why the war truly ends today."

Then it happened.

The scattered cheers of the people grew louder and merged into a unified countdown.

The sound of disciplined clapping fell into a rhythm, as if to urge on the soldiers. I could just barely see them raise their guns from across the crowded plaza.

And then—

The sound of gunfire pierced the air.



In the center of the plaza, which was engulfed in cheering and clapping, red flower petals danced prettily in the air.

"....."

That's not a metaphor. There were actually red flower petals flying around. When I held out my hands, one of the petals, carried by the wind, settled on my palm.

This floral confetti had been fired from the soldiers' guns.

They hadn't been loaded with actual bullets, and of course, no one had died.

On the contrary—

"...Hooray! We're finally human again!" "Ah...that was a long ten years..." "At last, we've been freed from that hell... seriously, those were some dark days..." "Booze! Bring us booze!" "I want to eat cake!" "I want a man!"

The strange creatures that had been huddled at the center of the circle were restored to human form. They were witches once more. In the shower of red flower petals, they shouted happily, embracing the soldiers and the people of this country.

"Huh, what's going on?"

I was puzzled once again.

"What do you mean? Isn't it obvious? We're all happy because the war is over!"

"....."

Huh? What?

"Um, I thought surely, now that ten years have passed and they're not immortal anymore, you would kill them all. I thought there was going to be that sort of gritty plot development."

"What are you talking about? Of course not. We've spent these last ten years repairing our relationship with those witches. We've forgiven one another and decided to move on and live in peace."

"...But in that case, why did you close the gate and cut off contact with the other country?"

"That was unavoidable. How well do you think it would have gone if, after we had stopped attacking each other, we'd handed over the witches in their transfigured states? Do you think we would have been forgiven if we said, 'We turned all of your witches into these strange creatures, but we don't feel like fighting anymore'? It would just have been pouring oil on a fire, so we waited for ten years to pass."

"And you all forgave the people of the other country?"

"We forgave and were forgiven. It's been a long time. That's why we're celebrating the end of the war with those witches."

"....."

All things considered, it was a pretty anticlimactic ending.

When they said that the creatures would lose their immortality after ten years, they had simply meant the curse would dissolve at the ten-year mark, and the trembling balls of dense hair, surrounded by soldiers, had neither been shrinking back nor shaking with fear but had been quaking with joy.

How unsatisfying.

Truly anticlimactic.

"I believe you said you were a traveler, correct? Does the other country still harbor a grudge against us?"

I smiled bitterly at the question.

"It seems that this year is the tenth year of that very grudge."



After that, I spent several days in a country full of joyous celebration.

I met the witches who had regained their humanity and told the people of this country about the state of the outside world.

The townspeople had apparently already decided on their plans for the future. They would open their borders for the first time in ten years and petition for reconciliation when they returned the witches to their neighbors.

I hope it goes well.

Though I guess it doesn't have too much to do with me.

"....."

I left after several days.

All signs of rain that had been in the air over the forest had disappeared, and a crisp, dry breeze was blowing past my collar.

The breeze felt nice.

I bet this would feel even better if I was on my broom.

“Let’s go!”

I had been taking a bit of a break.

I rose from the bench set in the shade of the forest, took out my broom, and sat sideways atop it. Beneath the gently rising broom, dry dirt swirled through the air, covering the bench.

The empty bench sat there stoically, as if waiting patiently for a new person to come and have a seat.



CHAPTER 9

Object Lessons: Thriving Among the Ruins

Good morning. Good afternoon. Good evening.

Which one is it? I guess it doesn't really matter.

This is my first time exchanging words with you like this, so allow me to offer my sincerest greetings. It is a pleasure to meet you.

I am Elaina. The Ashen Witch, Elaina.

I am a witch with ash-colored hair and lapis-colored eyes. I wear a black robe and a pointy black hat, as well as a star-shaped brooch.

I think you already know all this, but just in case, I wanted to give you a little self-introduction.

For some reason, right now, I am imprisoned inside this very city—or rather, this thing that looks a lot like a city. Sadly, I must inform you that I committed quite the blunder. Perhaps because I underestimated the place, or possibly, I was just careless. I could give any number of explanations, but to make a long story short, I really put my foot in it.

It was already too late by the time I thought about running away, so I ended up being taken prisoner here. My only means of escape was completely cut off, and I'm sure that even while I've been attempting escape, the scraps of sanity that remain in my mind are being ravaged by some outside force. Sometimes I lose sight of myself.

That's why I decided to send you out of this place.

I have a request for you, the one reading this letter far beyond the city walls.

Won't you please help me somehow? No doubt, I'm somewhere in the strange city stretching out before your eyes, living my life as a willing slave.

There's just one thing I would like you to do for me.

I want you to take me—trapped in this bizarre world—outside. If I make it out, the rest should fall into place somehow. I should regain my sanity.

It's possible that I will refuse, maybe even forcefully, but somehow, you must make sure that I leave with you.

If you don't do that, I will probably die here.

I understand this isn't rightfully something I should ask of you.

However, it's unlikely that anyone will conveniently come along to help me in this deep forest, even if I were to get out an SOS. Even if, by some good fortune, someone were to appear, would I even still be alive? No, if anything, the person who came to help me would probably meet the same fate.

What's more, you are not human.

You're an object, like the rest of them.

That's why I decided to ask you.

I realize this is a bit of a gamble.

I haven't used this kind of spell in a long while. I don't even know whether you will make it as far as reading this letter.

Even assuming that you do read it, you might tear it up and throw it away on the spot. There's nothing more shameless than me calling on you in my time of need after working you so harshly up until now.

Asking something like this of you is very selfish, and foolish, and obviously deceptive, so even if I've exhausted any affection you had for me and you throw this letter away on the spot, I have no right to complain.

But I couldn't not ask.

Please find a way to help me...

When I awoke, that letter was lying by my side.

An apology and a request for me, all in neat handwriting.

“.....”

The place where I was standing looked like a deep forest. In front of my eyes, as written in her letter, I could see a city stretching out before me.

Maybe because it had rained the other day, the ground was cratered with small puddles. When I peered briefly into one, I could see myself reflected in it.

I was wearing a confused expression.

I appeared to be in my early twenties. I had slightly messy, peach-colored hair and looked just like her, if you discounted the color.

My clothing also closely mirrored hers. I was clad in a black robe. I am not a witch, so I wore neither a pointy black hat nor a star-shaped brooch.

“.....”

So I guess my human form really does resemble her, eh?

They say that pets resemble their owners, and apparently, the same goes for possessions. This is the first time I've seen it.

What an amazing fact.

If I ever do meet her again—that is, if I manage to rescue her—I suppose it would be all right to tell her that.

“...Well then. Let's get going.”

I tried speaking, to no one in particular.

My voice was, as expected, exactly like hers—just like my owner, Mistress Elaina.

○

It happened just as I was flying through the forest on my broom.

“Ah, rain!”

Even worse, it was suddenly falling fiercely.

The sky had been gray all day. The clouds had been hanging heavily in the sky, looking like they might rain at

any moment, so I wasn't the least bit surprised by this weather. Actually, that's the very reason I was flying through the forest, so that I could take shelter at any time.

The downpour was much stronger than I had imagined, though.

"Ah, hey..."

Come on, what the heck is this?! Thanks to the rain, which easily passed through the canopy of tree branches overhead, I was soaked in a flash.

I was in trouble.

If I keep going like this, I'll probably catch a cold. What should I do?

"Hmm...mm?"

I was feeling annoyed by my misfortune, with my cheeks puffed out, when, conveniently, I spotted a large structure hidden down a narrow, narrow forest path.

What good luck!

I immediately decided to enter that city.

"Hello! Pardon the intrusion!"

As the rain continued to fall, I put away my broom and pulled out my umbrella, then knocked on a door embedded in the short wall. Creeping ivy and the branches of closely nestled trees shrouded the wall, as if nature had recognized it as a part of the forest. I could infer that this city must be very old.

I could infer that, but I didn't really care. I was begging for someone to hurry up and open the door.

It opened right after I made my wish.

With a loud creak, I got my first glimpse of what was on the other side of the gate...

"....."

...and I stiffened in shock.

I was blown away.

"....."

Beyond the door, a single book was floating in the air. It was flapping its pages with a flutter, like a butterfly.

I realized immediately this was no ordinary city.

"Uh, hello. Would you let me take shelter from the rain?"

I considered turning back as soon as I realized what was going on, but pressing any farther in the deluge was an even more unpleasant option.

"....."

Perhaps because the book could understand the meaning of my words, it bobbed its *body* up and down in the air, then proceeded with a flutter down the path that continued from the gate.

"...?"

I suppose it's asking me to come with it?

"Thank you."

Then I stepped foot into that city. Behind my back, I heard the door that had been open just a moment ago creaking shut. When I turned to look back, the outside world had already disappeared from view.

The place was too shabby to be called a city but too grand to be called a ruin.

It was awash with junk lying all over the place. I hadn't been able to tell from outside the gate, on account of the intense rain, but now that I was passing through the interior, I could see it looked awful. Clutter covered the narrow road pinched between rows of houses—the walkway was buried under broken plates, smashed clocks, plush animals with their stuffing sticking out, and all kinds of other small knickknacks.

This was an awfully strange place.

"....."

Finally, the flying book hovered into one of the buildings. The word *inn* was scrawled across the threshold. I stepped over it and entered.

“...What is this?”

Inside, it was even stranger.

“.....” “.....” “.....” “.....”

Apparently, the book wasn’t the only inanimate object that could move on its own. For example, an armoire without any drawers, a chair missing some legs, and wands and brooms that had been smashed to bits were meandering about freely. Their legs moved as if they were living things walking about without a care. As soon as they saw me, the objects hopped up and down on the spot.

...I guess they’re welcoming me?

No, but...

“Um, are you saying it’s all right for me to stay here?”

“.....”

The book bobbed up and down.

“Thank you very much for that. Where should I sleep?”

“.....”

The book fluttered on and led me to one of the rooms. It had a certain antiquated charm, to put it kindly. To put it unkindly, it was falling apart. But I was still grateful.

In contrast to the shabby room, the bed and certain furnishings looked quite new, though they all had visible signs of repair. The strange state of the furniture somehow made me even more uncomfortable.

“What shall we do about money?”

“.....”

The book shook itself left to right. The raindrops that had clung to it splashed against my face.

“...By the way, I just wanted to confirm, but the bed in this room isn’t going to start moving by itself, is it?”

“.....”

“Why aren’t you saying anything?”

I mean, it hasn’t spoken this whole time, but...

“.....”

Then the book slowly left the room.

“.....!”

Of course, as I expected, the bed began to move by itself, so I chased it out of the room, along with all the other furniture while I was at it.

After getting my lodgings into a state of neat and tidy emptiness, I changed clothes, pulled a sleeping bag out of my bag, and took a nap on the floor.

When I closed my eyes, the sound of pouring rain gently filled my ears.

The next day was also rainy.

It was truly unfortunate, but I would have to take a break from traveling that day as well.

“.....”

The flying book came to the room I was borrowing just to greet me in the morning.

“Oh, good morning.”

“.....”

“I’m sorry. I’d like to stay until the rain stops, is that all right?”

“.....”

The book nodded in agreement and then swung itself back and forth.

Come with me, it seemed to say.

After closing the door to the room and changing clothes, I reemerged to follow the book. We left the inn and headed outside briefly, before a castle-like building, conspicuously larger than the others in this city, came into view.

The flying book stopped there.

“.....”

“What is this place?”

Even if I asked, though, the book didn’t answer. As if it was ignoring me, my guide disappeared alone to the other side of the open gate.

“Um...”

I had some objections, but as there was no helping it, I

followed the book. I thought there must have been something it wanted to show me.

The book came to a stop in front of a door at the far end of a corridor on the first floor.

“.....”

The door, of course, opened by itself.

Here, just as I had been after passing through the gate into this country, I was speechless.

I was blown away.



After I finished carefully reading the letter, I knocked on the door.

“Hello there. I am...a traveler. In truth, I am an object, but for some reason, I have assumed human form.”

I gave this strange greeting to the book floating on the other side of the gate. *Who ever heard of a traveling object?*

“Oh-ho. An object, you say? So that means, I suppose, that you are hearing my voice?”

“Indeed I am.”

“Hmm...well, this is interesting. You’ve lived a long time, haven’t you? You’ve been a good item.”

“Thank you.”

“But for what reason have you assumed human form? If you don’t mind, I’d like to ask you to inform us of your circumstances.”

“Sure, I don’t mind.”

“Well then, I shall show you to my companions. By all means, I’d like to hear you tell your story in front of everyone. The tales of an object from another land will be a fine source of amusement for us.”

“I see... Sure. That should be fine. In exchange, it would be helpful if you could prepare a place where I can spend

the night."

"Certainly. I shall prepare accommodations of the highest quality."

With that, I successfully entered the city.

"Oh man. Hey, isn't that girl cute?"

"I know."

Behind my back, the gate added some colorful commentary as it creaked shut.

"Come to think of it, what form did you have originally?"

Up ahead, the book asked me something, and I returned my attention forward.

It was a natural question, and there was no need to hide the answer.

So I answered, "I am a broom. You know the brooms that witches carry? I'm one of those."

We walked partway through the city, and I was shown to a castle-like building that was conspicuously larger than any of the other structures in the area.

"Now then, please go ahead, Miss Traveler. This way."

The book showed me inside the castle, and we went up the staircase near the entrance to the second floor.

"What on earth is this place?"

"This used to be a city, a long time ago. This residence was used by the reigning monarch during those times. Well, in a word, it's a royal palace."

"Oh-ho!" I continued following the book. "Well then, where is the king now?" I cocked my head.

When I asked this, my guide didn't slacken its pace one bit and said simply, *"He is no more."*

Its voice was terribly cold when it said that.

Then, at the end of the second floor in front of a door, the book came to a stop.

"Well, please go ahead, Miss Traveler. I shall introduce you to my compatriots."

○

I was stunned. Before me, there were people, live people—only a few of them, sure, but actual people.

“Oh, that’s terrible. All of your legs are broken, aren’t they? Don’t worry. I’ll make them nice for you.”

“Mr. Plate, Mr. Plate, you’ve nearly reached the end of your lifespan, so you’d better not push it too hard...*eek!* I’m sorry, I’m sorry! Please stop throwing fragments of yourself!”

“Ho-ho-ho. Master Stuffie, you’re quite busted up there. It’s fine. I’ll fix you.”

The people here were apparently tasked with repairing all manner of odds and ends. Spread throughout the cavernous room, people sat facing knickknacks that were very worn out or completely broken. There were men and women of all ages, and judging from their appearances, they came from all walks of life. There were people dressed very much like travelers, some who looked like mages, and so on.

It was quite a chaotic scene.

Puzzling over this curious sight, I approached one of the people working there, an old man. He had the appearance of a mage and seemed quite experienced.

“Excuse me, what are you doing?”

The old man looked at me. “Oh, a newcomer, eh? This one’s still young.”

“Huh?”

A newcomer?

“Hmm-hmm. So you’re a witch? That’s good. That’ll lighten our workload.”

“Um...*workload* and *newcomer*... What on earth are you talking about?”

“Hmm. From your attitude, I guess you don’t know much about this place yet.”

"I just got here yesterday."

"I see..." The old man stroked his snowy white beard, and as he spoke, he continued sewing the arm of the small teddy bear hopping up and down in front of him. "This place is where we fix broken items, you see. Sooner or later everything wears out, so we shoulder the task of repairing whatever comes here."

"Huh."

"There are also things that arrive after breaking themselves on purpose before they reach the ends of their lives."

Uh-huh.

Are the objects here masochists or something?

"Hmm..."

But does he mean that these people are being forced to repair things that are broken?

"Did the people of this city invite you all here to help them?"

I was thinking that, if possible, I would like to meet the people living here—because I wanted to know more about this strange place.

But the old man shook his head.

"I'm afraid that's not it. We're laboring here in this city."

Now I understand.

"I see. So in other words, you all also got caught in yesterday's downpour and came here to wait out the rain?"

And in gratitude, you're fixing your hosts?

I see, I see.

"No—unfortunately, that's not it, either. We all live here. We live on-site and offer our services to the objects of this city."

"Live on-site, you say? What on earth for?"

"Well now, I plumb forgot! Ho-ho-ho."

Apparently, this elderly individual's memory was rather poor.

"...How long have you been here?"

"Well now. I know it's been a very long time. You see, I was on a journey, searching for things I could sell as a merchant, when I found this place. Before I knew it, I worked here! Ho-ho-ho..."

"....."

At this point, deep in the conversation, I finally realized the odd nature of this place—it seemed like a city yet wasn't one.

I mean, now that I thought about it, it was pretty strange to see all the objects moving about on their own.

I spun around and looked at the single book floating in the air. It stayed silent, as always, flapping around like a butterfly.

"....."

Perhaps noticing my gaze, the book came over by my side. It was mute and gave no indication that it might speak. I couldn't even guess what it was trying to communicate.

Then the book stopped just before me.

"....."

That's when it happened.

It was a feeling like I had been struck in the head with something hard—a sudden instability assailed me, like the ground was spinning round and round.

Before I knew it, I was lying flat on the floor, and when I looked up, the flying book was bobbing in the air above me.

My consciousness was rapidly slipping away, and my body felt as if it were turning to lead, until finally, I couldn't so much as lift a finger.

I don't really remember what happened after that.



"All of these are your compatriots?"

We were on the second floor of the castle. The room at the end was overflowing with all kinds of objects. From

small things like pens, to large items like bookshelves, and everything in between. They were all talking to other books that had the same cover as the one that was by my side.

"You see? Hey, look right here! I'm totally broken! I'll never move again like this!"

"It's because I've lived a very long time, you know. My body's showing its age here and there. Come on and fix me, all right?"

"It's too late for me... I'm just a defective item that can't even move right... Ohh..."

The objects that were whining along with the books were all quite worn out and broken.

What on earth do they do in this place? I tilted my head in confusion, and the book told me about it.

"This is the reception area for the repairs room."

"Huh."

"This is where they submit repair requests and get regular inspections before being sent to the repairs room on the first floor."

"Uh-huh."

"Also, it's a place where we can all get together and just chat."

"So when the elderly have spare time, they tend to congregate in places like this?"

"Recently, objects have been...congregating more often. Look, you see all those groups hanging out in the corners?"

"Well, it just looks like a bunch of rubbish."

The book laughed at my words.

"We have too much free time and not enough to do. It can't be helped." As it spoke, the book proceeded deeper into the room. *"Well, come along, Miss Traveler. I shall introduce you to everyone."*

I walked along behind it, and as expected, since my current form was quite strange, I felt the gazes of all the aged furniture that had just been chatting there, as well as the aged books they had been chatting with, turning to me

all at once.

When the book stopped in the center of the room, it whirled around me and spoke. *"Everyone! Today a rare friend has come to our country. Look at her. She is an object in human form."*

A commotion spread through the room.

"What did he say? An object in human form?" "This is rare!" "She must be very long-lived." "But how pitiful, to be turned into a human..."

"Everyone, quiet down. The fact that there is an object in a form like this is, to us, a serious situation. It's the kind of thing we ought to be concerned about. Let us listen to the tale of how she came to be transformed. Beyond that, let us become her strength and uplift her."

Then the book said, *"If you would ask why we should do this, it's because she is an object just like us. She is our kin."*

After making this pronouncement, the book left my side, as if to say, *"All right, go ahead."* It came to rest on the floor nearby.

I could feel the attention of all the items gathered in that room focused on me alone.

"....."

After a brief moment's silence, I spoke.

As I did, I kept in mind what had been written in the letter from Lady Elaina and the plan to help her escape this place.

"I had a curse placed on me by an evil witch and was transformed into this."



My memory after I collapsed was very hazy.

When I came to, I was lying in my room, and mysteriously, the bed and other furniture I was sure I had

chased out were all back in place. I exited, though, without paying that any particular mind.

I was headed for the first floor of the castle.

There, just like the other people, I fixed things.

"My, you're quite dirty, aren't you? But don't worry. I'm a witch, so I can easily clean up something like this!"

I applied my magic to the mute object in front of me, speaking with a tone of voice too sweet to be my own.

"Hmm. Newbie. You've got quite the knack for this. Ho-ho-ho."

"Is that so? Oh-ho-ho."

Unfortunately, that was me lighting up with a full-face smile when I was praised by the old mage working beside me.

In that place, I was no longer myself.

I was like that all day, my memory and consciousness hazy as if I were in a dream. My body didn't listen to the things I told it to do, as if I were being controlled like a marionette.

The scary thing is, I had no doubts about my new reality.

My normal consciousness returned only late at night, after I was back in my room.

"Ugh...what in the world...?"

I couldn't stop shuddering at the terrible truth of my situation.

Come to think of it, I had visited a place like this before.

A mysterious country where there were lots of cats and people's hearts were stolen by them. That time, by pure coincidence, I had been able to escape unharmed due to my natural aversion to cats, but...

Assuming this place, in the same way as the cat country, could steal away people's hearts, what on earth could have caused it?

.....

That's a no-brainer. The people here were infatuated with material possessions, right? No doubt, just like in that

other country, they started showering them with endless affection.

“...Hmm.”

I’m in trouble here. No matter what it takes, I’ve got to escape. It doesn’t matter if it’s raining. This place is much more awful than being out in the rain.

If possible, it would be best to escape right away.

It happened immediately after I scrambled to take out my broom.

“Wah!”

Unnoticed by me, the bedsheets that had returned to my room stretched out toward me, grabbed my hands, and pulled—hard.

Ah, this is one of those places from which you can never escape.

I sensed this after having been dragged down onto the bed and covered with a blanket.

“...Uhhh.”

This is a prison.

The next day, as expected, I was in a dreamy haze and performed my work as usual.

“Okay! You’re all fixed. Take care!”

With a wide smile, I sent the stuffed animal I had just finished fixing on its way. I even waved good-bye. I wanted to ask who that strange girl was, but it was me.

When it was time for lunch, a pot and a cutting board (old, like everything else) served us a questionable meal. It was grass, grass, and more grass, which apparently grew in the area. In a word, it was weeds.

“Ho-ho-ho, delicious!” “The grassy taste of these leaves is so very juicy!” “Ah...to be able to enjoy such cuisine. It makes me so happy!”

But everyone ate it with the utmost satisfaction.

It was alarming, but my expression was as blissful as

ever.

“.....”

I was still smiling radiantly and tried to extend a hand toward the weeds, but sure enough, they were too repulsive, so I forced my hand to stop. Me and the thing that was not me fought each other in mid-gesture, and my hand, which was hanging halfway in between, was trembling.

“Hmm? It looks like your consciousness still comes back to you sometimes,” the old man said as he watched me suspiciously while munching on weeds.

“...Looks...that way...”

Oh, I spoke!

“Ho-ho-ho. I was that way at first, too. I hated being forced to work here and thought I had to escape no matter what.”

Oh?

“H-how...about...now...?!”

“Don’t talk in a husky voice while wearing such a big smile. It’s scary, you know.” After emptying his bowl of weeds, the old man continued, “Now I don’t really think anything of it. Far from it, I find I like being here.”

“.....”

“Well, you’ll be the same sooner or later. The same as me and all our other companions.” Then the old man said, “Don’t vex yourself. Leave everything to the objects here. It’ll get easier.”

That is absolutely out of the question.

That was how I wanted to reply, but unfortunately, my consciousness had already surrendered.

That’s how it was at first.

Meaning that the more time passed, the more limited my chances to escape would become. Looking at it the other way, it meant that, at the present moment, my chance of

escape was better than zero.

“...Hmm.”

That night, I pondered.

Ah, I wonder if I can escape on my broom?

Happily, since I hadn't yet been confined here for very long, I could use not only my mouth but my entire body freely.

The same thing had happened the day that the rain, which had continued falling for several days, finally stopped. I found myself able to control my own body with complete mastery.

This is a good opportunity.

I wasn't foolish enough to let a chance like this slip out from under me.

With great haste, I willed my body into motion. *Well then, let's hurry up with this escape plan, eh?*

“Ohh...”

First step. The furniture and bed are in the way.

I chased them out of the room. While I was at it, I used a spell to seal the door with ice, locking them out. I could hear the sound of furious pounding on the other side, but I let it slide.

“Kaaay...”

Second step. Take out my broom. Done.

“Okay...”

Third step. I cast two spells on it. The first was an easy one that any mage would have known: a simple spell but used in a way that I had never seen before. The second was a spell I had invented when I had too much free time during my training with Miss Fran. It was very peculiar.

I cast both spells.

“Here we go.”

Now, the final step.

I wrote a letter.

Done.

The plan was going off without a hitch.

“.....!” “...!” “.....!” “! ...!”

However, there was no way the gang outside the door was going to let me escape that easily. No sooner had I finished the letter than the bed and furniture I had chased out, along with a pack of their compatriots, finally burst through the frozen door. Ice crystals scattered about the room with a crunch as the bed, desk, chair, plates, cutlery, rope, blankets, and sheets all came flying in.

I fled immediately. Gripping my broom, according to the plan, I broke the window and flew directly over the ruined city.

Of course, they weren't going to let me escape without a fight, and one after another, objects flowed out of the broken window, chasing me. Strangely, they were joined by a number of shards of the very window I had just shattered.

Gripping my broom with one hand, I used my wand to summon big gusts of wind and blow them at my attackers, knocking them down one after the other. Unfortunately, there were just too many. More and more knickknacks were joining the swarm, not only the ones that had pursued me out the broken window but also things that had been lying scattered around town.

“Wahh...!”

Pulling hard, I focused on the path forward. The exit to this strange place was just ahead. I was hoping I could say good-bye here.

...But it didn't go so well.

Just as I was closing in on the exit, as if it had made up its own mind to do so, my body stopped listening to what I was telling it to do. No matter how hard I tried to exert my will over it, my body just trembled, rendering itself useless.

Before long, regardless of my intentions, I fell from the broom.

“...So I failed after all, huh?”

I crashed atop a roof and landed in such a way that I was staring up at the sky. At this point, my body had even

stopped shaking. Only from the neck up was I still managing to hold on to my consciousness.

“.....”

Well, I knew it. I thought this was how it would turn out anyhow.

It would have really been something if I had managed to escape on my broom, but from listening to what the old man said, I had known that a simple escape was unlikely to work.

Even if I had tried to run, whatever force was prevailing over this country was likely to pin me down in my mind and take control of my body. The same result was probable even if I went around destroying each and every one of my captors with my magic.

However...

That's precisely why I had cast those two spells on my broom.

The first had been a simple spell...

...a simple spell that would keep the broom flying on its own for a certain length of time.

The second was key.

The second spell gave life to inanimate objects. It gave them life and transfigured them into human form. An incredibly odd spell that never really saw any use. A spell I had developed just to kill time when I was supposed to be training with Miss Fran.

I had never thought that it would come in handy at a time like this.

The gang of objects was chasing me and me alone. None of them would go out of their way to chase down a broom. I was certain it would be able to escape to the outside world without incident.

Looking up, I could see my broom flying by itself through the sky.

“I'm counting on you...”

Whatever it takes, please save me...



There was more to the letter.

Mistress Elaina had drawn up an escape plan in great detail. It was so detailed that you would never think it had been written in a hurry. This is what she wrote:

I think it's likely the objects of this city have been driven mad by the constant magical energy radiating from the surrounding forest.

For some reason, there are no longer any human residents here. The only people are the unfortunate souls who, like me, happened to get lost. Every one of them is being treated like a slave by the living objects.

I'm certain that the items in this place must hold an extreme prejudice against us humans.

So I had this thought.

Surely, the objects here will take pity on you, an object in human form. They'll lavish compassion on you. When they meet you, they'll definitely want to ask you how you came to be in such a poor state.

When they do, tell them this:

"I had a curse placed on me by an evil witch and was transformed into this."

Lie and tell them an evil witch turned you, an object, into human form and is tormenting you.

After that, ask them this:

"That witch is incredibly evil. She's so evil, she has even killed people. Right now, I'm on the hunt for her. Does

anyone know anything about her? She's a young witch, with ash-colored hair and lapis-colored eyes."

I'm sure the objects who hear this will become agitated. There will probably also be some who reveal their anger.

There's no way they won't remember seeing me. They won't be able to contain themselves upon learning that the detestable human who just entered their country the other day is actually extremely evil.

The rest is just to seal the deal.

Try saying something like this to them:

"If, by any chance, anyone has seen her, would you be so kind as to hand her over to me? I've got to take her back to my hometown so that she may be executed."

I'm sure they'll be thrilled.

They seem like the sort who delight in human sorrow more than anything.

...And so on.

I proceeded according to the plan that Lady Elaina had laid out.

Just as she had predicted, the objects assembled reacted seriously to every single word I said, lamented my circumstances even as I lied to them, and showed their resentment and hatred toward the Ashen Witch.

Up to that point, everything was going fine.

"I see... No doubt it has been difficult, being transformed into the likes of a human. You have my sympathies."

"Thank you for that. I appreciate it."

I returned only superficial thanks for the misdirected sympathies of the book, which had no idea what was really on my mind. This lot could not possibly understand someone like me, who had been overjoyed to assume my mistress's

form.

"So then, did the witch come to this place?" I decided to move the conversation along. I wanted to get her out of here as soon as possible.

"Yes. She's here. Right now, I believe she's being made to help with repairs downstairs."

"Well then, I'd like to ask you to bring her out."

When I said that, the book shook itself in response to my words.

Side to side.

"That won't be possible."

"Uh..."

I was shaken by the unexpected development. The book went on to say something I couldn't believe.

"We will be executing the witch. Unfortunately, we won't be able to fulfill your request to hand her over."

".....Huh?"

I couldn't hide my surprise.

Mistress Elaina, what am I supposed to do now?



I pitched a fit, saying that, first of all, I wanted to confirm that the witch they had was indeed the Ashen Witch herself. I was shown to the first floor.

Sure enough, there was Mistress Elaina. She was in the middle of repairing a broom.

"My! This is terrible, huh? You're all split ends, aren't you? Your brush end is all tattered and torn, and your adorable curl is messed up," said Elaina.

"Oh, this girl's cute. Heh-heh. Show me your panties," snickered the broom.

"Okay, I'll fix you right up. Just hold still!" said Elaina.

The two of them could not actually communicate, of course.

The book lined up next to me and watched what was happening.

"Is she the evil witch?" it asked.

"...Yes. She is. But why are you going to execute her?"

"She was too violent, and she has proven very stubborn on top of that. She's not easily affected by our city's spell. She seems likely to regain her full consciousness sooner or later."

"So you're executing her? You've got an awfully messed up way of thinking about things, haven't you?"

"Actually, we've become quite docile with age. In the past, every object here would have killed a human on sight."

"....."

Then, having touched on that subject, I had a realization.

I asked, "What on earth happened to the humans who originally lived here?"

The book answered dispassionately, "*They left. We drove them out.*"

"There you go. Good as new!"

"How 'bout it, baby? Wanna go on a date with me? Heh-heh."

"Next, please!"

Lady Elaina continued her task, completely indifferent to us.

The book told me the truth about what had happened there.

It had taken place some ten years earlier.

Back then, when this was still a thriving city, many rich people made their living here, and in its own way, the land was prosperous, and humans abounded.

However, the people were cruel and did not take care of their possessions.

They were surrounded by forests and flush with

resources. They could make new things whenever they wanted simply by cutting down nearby trees. There was little consideration given to repair and reuse. Whenever anything broke, they would just make a new one.

The humans found it inconvenient to carry old junk outside for disposal, so they piled everything they no longer wanted together in one forgotten corner of the city. Even though they were still useful, even though they were still alive, these former treasures were discarded just because of a little scratch or because the humans had lost interest in them.

The objects, forsaken in their prime by humans, resentfully watched their former owners go on living while they were piled atop a trash heap.

The mountain of rubbish forming in the corner of the city gradually grew larger and larger, and the pent-up resentment of the discarded objects swelled along with it.

Eventually, around the time the pile surpassed the trees in height, the humans began to wonder what they ought to do with all the junk.

"If we keep going like this, we'll run out of space." "It's in the way." "The view is getting worse." "How about burying it instead and making a real mountain?" "Let's dispose of it somewhere else."

The talks continued for a long time, but during the discussions, not once were the words *let's reuse them* uttered.

In the end, the people decided on a compromise. They would take half of the things they had thrown away with no regard for whether they were still useful and dispose of them elsewhere. The other half they would bury.

At that point, the anger of the discarded belongings reached its peak.

That's when the changes began.

The objects, which had been treated so cruelly by the humans, learned to move by themselves, and the people

became devoted to them. It was just like that country where everyone started loving cats.

Perhaps the magical energy that thrived in the deep forest gave them the disposition to toy with people's hearts.

Anyway, all of the people present in that place started serving the objects. The former possessions gained the ability to walk around under their own power, using resentment as one driving force.

However, the rage of the objects was not appeased. The things, which had been treated like garbage and thrown away, could no longer trust human beings.

"From now on, this is our country. All of you, leave right now and take nothing with you."

The objects gathered together all the people living in the city, made their declaration, and chased them out.

In reality, the humans couldn't hear their former possessions' voices, so they probably all just ran away because they were afraid of the objects that could suddenly move on their own.

Anyway, that was how the city of objects came to be.

However, there had been one grievous oversight.

Being objects, they would lose the ability to move when their life span was up. For some ten years, they lived alone in their new city, without any visitors, but one after another, the objects began to fall still.

When they broke, there were no humans to fix them.

Without a plan, they were in trouble.

The desperate objects opened the gate and started beckoning humans in.

The occasional traveler who lost their way.

Or a traveler who just came seeking shelter from the rain.

Without exception, the new masters of the city welcomed their visitors, waited for their wills to break, then forced them to fix broken objects, all while treating them as slaves.

Then, the other day, *she* had shown up—apparently, that

was the situation.



This is what happened that evening.

"Huh? The witch with the gray hair? Ah, she's staying in that inn over there."

Late at night, I slipped out of my high-class lodgings (though thanks to the passage of time, the palace was more like a run-down hotel) and spoke to each object I met that was still awake to determine where Mistress Elaina was located.

I had feared she might have been transferred from the inn to the jail, on account of her rampage yesterday, but somehow, she was still in the same room the book had shown her to initially.

"I want to watch that witch suffer a little while longer. Please allow me to visit her." I talked a big game, and the objects quickly showed me to her.

I appear in the form of a human, but I'm really an object. There's no need to worry about the magic here messing with my mind, like it messed with Lady Elaina's.

In other words, until the spell wore off and I turned back to normal, I was able to walk around under my own power.

"All right. This is my chance."

Then, for the first time since yesterday, I returned to Mistress Elaina's side.

"Pardon the intrusion." I opened the door after knocking, and Mistress Elaina was there, sitting on the bed in a daze, looking up at the moon floating outside the window. A slight breeze was blowing through, as we had broken that same window the day before, and the wind lightly stirred her beautiful hair.

The window, which had yet to be repaired, its fragments scattered around the floor, was shouting its complaints,

"Um...I'd like you to fix me!" I ignored it.

"You are Miss Elaina, the Ashen Witch, correct?" I asked her, and she turned to face me.

"That's right. And you are? Oh, a newcomer? I see."

"I haven't said anything yet."

"But I'm already sleepy, I want to sleep."

"I can't allow you to sleep tonight."

"You suck."

"It's a joke." I coughed once and cleared my throat, then got back to the main topic. "Actually, I've come today with some information for you."

"Information...? But just who are you? And from where?"

"I am an important person in this city," I lied.

"An important person...huh? Are there such people?"

"There are. Actually, I've seen you at work and decided to come meet you in person."

"Oh, to praise me?"

"The opposite."

"Ah..."

Everything from this point on is a lie.

"You've been fixing the objects of this country too well. Our citizens don't want to be fixed in the first place."

"What did you say?"

"They actually want to get broken," I lied.

"What? But the people in the castle said we're here to perform repairs."

"All of them are mistaken."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously. The objects that thrive in this country actually have a plan, every last one of them. You can't understand what they say, which has apparently caused a misunderstanding, but they are all masochists."

"Masochists?"

"Yes. And to be broken by a young girl such as yourself would be their greatest joy."

"Joy?"

"To go to you to be broken, only to be fixed instead... there's a lot of frustration building."

"Frustration?"

"That's the situation."

"I never..." Mistress Elaina hung her head, crestfallen.

I extended my hand and pointed at her.

"But rest assured, it's not too late. You can still mend your ways."

"What do you mean?"

I said, "From now on—"

It happened right after I said that. The sheets on the bed must have been listening. Now, they shot out and grabbed my hand. I was quickly pulled down onto the bed and smothered with a blanket.

"Hey, what's the big idea? Are you planning to betray us?" the bed asked. *"I'm going to report your strange behavior."*

"I won't give you the chance." I continued where I had been interrupted. "Mistress Elaina, from now on, please be sure to break any object that stands before you. That is how you can show them that you truly care."

"Huh, seriously?"

"Seriously. While we're on the topic, the city gates in particular want you to break them."

"What?"

"Go knock them down, please. Now."

"Right now?"

"Right now, please."

"....." Mistress Elaina looked to be lost in thought for a moment. Eventually, she said, "I understand. I'll go break the gate down."

"That would be wonderful. And by the way..."

"Was there something else?"

I wriggled one hand out of the grasp of the blankets and said, "This bed is also a masochist."

"Should I smash it?"

“By all means.”

Mistress Elaina nodded at my words and pulled out her wand. Then she moved toward the bed that was holding me captive.

“Wait a minute. You can’t think it’ ll be over just like that if you do such a—ah, aaaaaaahhh—!”

A heartbreaking death wail filled the room, but it never made it to Lady Elaina’s ears.



The road from the inn to the city gates was filled with the screams of many objects.

“Ohh...”

“*Ow! Ow! Ow! Aaaaaaaaahhh!*”

“Kaaay...”

“*Eeeeeekkk....! Have mercy—*”

“Okay...”

“*Noooooo! I’m being smaaaaaashed!*”

“All right...”

“*How dare you—ah, wait, stop it, noooooo!*”

The gallant figure of Mistress Elaina, knocking down swarms of knickknacks one after another, was truly magnificent.

“Um, is this really making them happy?”

Even wearing a dubious expression, Mistress Elaina was superb. She was a sight for sore eyes.

“It’s fine. They’re very happy.”

Of course, this was a lie. I accompanied Mistress Elaina, calmly deceiving her the whole time.

Somehow, it seemed I was quite adept at lying.

I wonder, is this another point on which I resemble my mistress?

She was every bit the witch. The swarms assailing us

were no match for Lady Elaina, and it did not take us long to reach the city gates. However...

"It seems we should never have trusted an object in human form."

Apparently, it would be harder than I thought for us to escape to the outside world.

Every available object had stacked up together, transforming into a giant humanoid monster. Somehow, they had assembled and created an impromptu behemoth.

The monster, large enough to tower over the city gate and the nearby trees, laughed. Its voice was made of many small voices all laughing together. "*Mua-ha-ha-ha!*"

Come to think of it, the book did say that objects had been congregating a lot lately...

"What deplorable behavior," the book embedded in the face of the monster said. *"Thanks to you two, a large number of our kin have perished. You shall not be forgiven. Those of us left alive have formed this giant and are going to send you straight to he—"*

"Yaah!"

One arm of the rubbish giant was blown off.

"Wait, I'm still talking!"

"Mistress Elaina, please wait a moment."

"Oh, sorry."

After watching the discarded arm flatten a house, the giant (and the book) said, *"Humans are always like this. They selfishly bring us into existence, then throw us away as soon as they no longer need us. How foolish they are! They create us, then take no responsibility for the lives they have created. On top of that, our words never get through to them—don't you see? Can't you understand our rage at being cast aside halfway through life?"*

"I'm afraid not." I shook my head.

I had been valued by my mistress since the day I was born, so I could not possibly understand.

"This is our fury. This giant body is the embodiment of

the grudge we hold toward humans! With it, we shall eradicate the humans we so despise—”

“Okay!”

The other arm of the giant was blown off.

“Wait!”

“Mistress Elaina.”

“Hmm, not yet?”

“Please wait a little longer.”

“Geez...”

Mistress Elaina was still incredibly cute, even when she was sulking, but right now we were in the middle of an important conversation.

Let’s get back to the main portion of the story.

“I understand your anger. However, that’s not a good reason to harm people.”

“What are you saying? We hurt them because they hurt us. Is that not justice?”

“I’m telling you to learn your place. To be used when you are necessary and discarded when you are not needed. Such is our fate.”

“Well then, how are we any better than slaves?”

“I’m not finished talking yet,” I said. “If you are discarded because you are no longer needed—you should continue to wait. Keep waiting until you are born anew or until you are needed again. If you hold on to your memories of when you were treated as important, you should be able to wait forever.”

So your grudges and hatred are utterly misplaced. This was the message behind the look I gave the giant.

“Whether they’re misplaced or not, our anger is real! All humans—including you! We will never forgive them! The two of you shall die here!”

“.....”

Apparently, my words were not getting through to them.

“You all are mistaken.” Despite that, I continued. “However, I do understand your sadness at not having been

taken care of.”

With that, I clapped a hand down on Mistress Elaina’s shoulder.

As if she understood just what I wanted to say, she prepared her wand.

Magic blasted forth from her hand, blowing the body of the giant to pieces.

“Rest in peace.”

I don’t suppose my words made it through to them this time, either.



When we passed through the gate, Mistress Elaina finally regained control over her mind. In the forest, beneath the moonlight, she wore a pained expression.

“...Somehow, I feel like I just woke up from a very long, very bad dream.”

“I’m sorry to say that it was all real.”

When I gave that answer, Mistress Elaina said, “...You’re, um...my broom, aren’t you?”

“Yes. I certainly am.”

“.....”

“Do you find me unpleasant?”

She shook her head, enough to make her hair sway slightly.

“I was just thinking that you look a bit like me. I was surprised.”

“A possession always resembles its owner.”

“Like a pet, huh?”

I just nodded and didn’t reply.

“.....”

Silence descended between us.

Her expression at the time was complicated, so much so that I’m not sure how to describe it. It looked as if she was

thinking hard over something, or worrying, but in any case, there's no doubt that it was dark.

"What is it?" I tilted my head.

In response, Mistress Elaina said, ".....Um. Thank you, very much...for, uh...helping me. And also—"

I didn't want to hear the words that were coming after that.

As she had written in her letter, I suppose she wanted to apologize for never trying to meet me, despite having a spell that could let her converse with objects and despite knowing that I could talk to her.

"I understand your feelings," I interrupted. "It's nothing to worry about. Even if I can't speak to you, even if my voice doesn't make it through, I am your possession, through thick and thin. I will not resent you, even if you were to abuse me."

"....."

"But I'm not thrilled about things like flying around with a zombie's head stuck on me."

"Oh, sorry about that."

I said, "I'm not especially concerned about it, but... But if you really want to apologize to me for something, I do have one favor to ask."

"...?"

"Will you hear it?"

Mistress Elaina nodded immediately.

And so I, without hesitation, made one selfish request.

"Please help me with something."



The city where objects could move on their own...several weeks had passed since we visited that place.

The weather was clear. A pleasant early summer breeze blew through the trees in the forest, brushing past my

cheek.

“.....”

I could see quite a change in the state of the place, visiting it several weeks later.

Maybe it's because the weather's nice?

No, that's not the only thing.

“Well, well. This is really incredible.” “There's so many...” “Stay in order! Don't fool around!” “Hey! I saw this one first!” “Shut up, who cares!” “It's first come, first served, I think.” “Ho-ho-ho!”

The merchants gathered around the narrow gate were fighting among themselves as they carried treasures out of the city. They piled many broken items onto their carts, and the horses pulling them let out strained whinnies.

“Say, but this is really an incredible place, isn't it? It's full of such amazing things. If we fix them up and sell them, they should fetch quite a price.” One of the merchants turned to me. “Thank you, truly, for finding this.”

“I came across it by accident, when I was seeking shelter from the rain.”

The objects piled up on the carts may have been broken, but they could still be used if they were fixed. Their lives were not yet over. My broom had hoped to provide them with a chance to flourish once again, to give them another shot at true happiness.

“Miss Witch. Here!” One of the merchants pressed a package into my hand. It was quite heavy, and when I peeked inside, I saw the shine of many silver coins.

“All the merchants here pooled our money. Please use it. As thanks for showing us such a trove.”



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I pushed it back to the merchant without hesitation.
“There’s no need. I didn’t show you this place for the money.”

“Oh? Well then, why did you do it?”

To the merchant wearing a puzzled expression, I only said, “I was asked to. By a dear friend.”

By a very, very good-natured girl.

I hadn’t exchanged words with her the whole time since I first met her.

Even though I had developed a spell that would make it possible, for some reason, I had never used it.

The reason was simple.

I was scared. I didn’t want to know what kind of things my broom was usually thinking. I didn’t want to imagine what shape she would take or what she would talk about when my prized possession took human form.

So until now, I hadn’t used that spell on any of my own things.

“.....”

However, I’m glad I met her in that city of broken objects.

I was very happy I could get her to help me.

Now I feel truly glad for who my broom turned out to be.

“Well then, let’s go, shall we?”

I didn’t put my thoughts into words.

I am a person, and she is an object.

My voice wouldn’t reach her.

But I believe she understood my feelings anyway.

Sitting on my broom, I kicked off the ground.

As if answering me, my broom softly lifted off into the sky.

Gradually, all traces of the old city and the merchants below disappeared from view, and a new world spread out before my eyes.

After a few days of rest in my travels, I was finally ready

to resume my journey.
Together with my precious possession.



CHAPTER 10

A Story About a Werewolf...or Something Similar

I was hurrying down the road one night.

I had arrived at that country just two days before. On the first day, I simply went sightseeing, and on the second, I spent the day touring the city's scenic spots. Then today, my third, I was also devoting myself to sightseeing.

I was told there was a hill nearby that had a beautiful view at night, so I made a point of leaving early in the evening, intending to return later that night.

I was walking down the road, illuminated by streetlamps, late that evening doing this and that. Rubbing my arms anxiously, looking behind me at times, I quickly followed the road that would lead me back to the inn.

The street was eerie at night. It was as if the same road I had traveled during the day had completely transformed. It looked like it was transporting me to a different world.

As if invited in by the deep darkness, a fog had enveloped the town, and I could barely see. Cast by the streetlamps, my shadow loomed large ahead of me.

“...Hmm.”

No, I was mistaken.

The shadow in front of me was not my own. Even if I stood perfectly still, it swayed and squirmed in the darkness.

—Something was barring my path.

“...Um, who’s there?” Quickly, I took out my wand and pointed it in that direction.

In response to my quavering demand, the shadow swayed, then slowly, purposefully slithered toward me.

Shuffle, shuffle. The sounds of shoes echoed down the

street.

And then, the shadow finally became clear.

"Mua-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I am a werewolf! I have been lying in wait here for several days. It's dangerous to walk around alone at night, you know, because a monster like me might eat you!"

I was rather surprised.

Before my eyes was, as he said, a werewolf!

"....."

It was a werewolf!

A genuine werewolf!

"Oh, what's this? Too scared to speak? Ha-ha-ha, that's right, you're scared!"

I looked up at the beast. "...*Hahh.*" I let out a sigh.

"Hey, wait a second. Why did you sigh? I'm a werewolf, you know. A monster. I'm going to eat you now."

"Oh, sure."

"Don't say 'sure'!"

"Sorry, I was just a little disappointed. Your entrance, with the fog and the shadows, got me all excited."

"Disappointed? I'm a werewolf! Don't you know about werewolves? We're very famous monsters! Everyone knows about werewolves!"

"I don't suppose you've taken a look in a mirror lately, have you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm going to tell you this as kindly as possible, but... well...you're not a werewolf."

"...Well then, what am I?"

"A dogman."

"A dogman?"

"A Chihuahua, to be specific."

"Wait, what's a Chihuahua?"

"One of the cutest breeds of dog there is."

So try to imagine this, please.

Standing in front of me was a creature with the face of a Chihuahua and the body of a musclebound man. A man fully covered in dingy brown fur, with a flamboyant voice. But a Chihuahua's head.

I couldn't have been more uncomfortable. It was as if I were looking at all kinds of filth stewed together and dumped into a hotpot.

That's how jarring the spectacle before me was.

I mean, I did my best to act frightened, and the stage was perfect for a spooky entrance, so what the heck was his problem?

I'm so angry!

"I mean, come on! What the heck was that? Why did you loudly announce that you're a werewolf, and while making that face? Are you stupid? Got a screw lose maybe? There's not knowing your place, and then there's whatever the heck you're doing. Oof, what a loser."

"...Isn't that going a bit far?"

"Look, why don't you just have a seat over there."

"Um, okay, ma'am." I realized that the (self-proclaimed) werewolf had even started speaking politely. He grunted and sat cross-legged on the ground.

"Are you making fun of me? Sit properly, of course." I kicked his knees.

The Chihuahua man let out a pitiful yelp and corrected his posture. He was looking up at me with teary eyes.

I'm so pissed.

"To begin with, do you know how most people would react when a creature like you with a monstrous face pops out along a road at night, just like this?"

"They'd be frightened."

"No." I shook my head. "They'd laugh."

"Why's that?"

"Because your face is cute. If you want to call yourself a werewolf, you're going to need to invest in some plastic

surgery."

"You're being really mean."

"That's your own fault."

"Is that so?"

"It is."

"....."

Let's continue.

"Why are you out accosting humans in the first place?"

"Well, the thing is...you see...there's a tragic reason behind it."

Then the Chihuahua man told me of his sad circumstances.

Apparently, he was the child of a union between a human and a Chihuahua. Apparently, his father was the human half. You're probably wondering how on earth a child was born to a human and a dog, but some would call these kinds of absurd incidents miracles. In a world where magic exists, these things do happen sometimes. What a headache.

Anyway, the Chihuahua man had been living with his parents deep in the remote mountains until recently, but he had finally reached maturity. Naturally, puberty also paid a visit.

"I'm leaving this house already!" One day, after a long and stupid argument, the Chihuahua man said farewell to his parents.

His father shook his head and said, "Stop this! You can't live on your own!" and his mother just whimpered sadly.

Then the Chihuahua man descended the mountain and went looking for a job in the city, but he had no luck. He was too repulsive to work at a restaurant, too repulsive to work at an inn, too repulsive for anything. There was no place for him at all.

That was as it should have been. He wasn't a werewolf, but a Chihuahua man. He didn't just get hairy on the nights when the moon was full, but all day every day, he looked like an odd cross between Chihuahua and human.

Of course he was repulsive.

And so, shunned by the world, the Chihuahua man grew sad and angry.

I had already gotten tired of listening at around that point, but apparently, unable to find gainful employment, he had grown desperate and decided to try attacking humans as a werewolf to steal their money.

Incidentally, I was to be his first victim.

"But look here, you've got to know that nobody is going to believe that you are a werewolf. I mean, just look at you. You won't terrify a single person. It's an insult to werewolves everywhere."

"Well then, what should I do?"

"...Huh."

So you're delegating it to me? Well, all right, I guess.

"First of all, for now, you should do something about that cute little face of yours. That's diluting the fear factor."

"But I don't have money for plastic surgery..."

"Don't worry. Even without money, it will all work out. Start by shaving off your fur. All of it."

"If I shave, won't I lose any resemblance to a werewolf?"

"You're not a werewolf, and you don't look like one, so don't worry about shaving."

"But..."

"I said don't worry about it. If you just listen to me, you'll be able to make a lot of money soon. It's fine. You've got the right stuff."

"Even though I'm not really a werewolf...?"

"Yes, of course." I nodded. "But for it to work, you've got to shave your fur."

"After I shave, what should I do...?"

Then, wearing a slightly vicious smile, I said, "Here's what you'll do..."



Several days passed.

I was waiting for a man at night in a foggy city.

"Well, hello there, Miss Witch."

Here he is. Fully shaved, the man had a neat, fresh look.

"Hi there. I've been waiting for you. How has your take been recently?"

"About that...it's been incredible! Just as you said, Miss Witch, since I shaved, everyone I meet on the road at night is frightened and runs away!"

"I thought so."

Most people would find a cleanly shaved Chihuahua gross, after all.

"The whole city is completely terrified of me, to the point where when I scream, '*Rrraaahhh!* Gimme your money!' people drop their wallets and run."

"I thought so."

Incidentally, the Chihuahua man had become the subject of many rumors concerning a disgusting little goblin accosting people at night. I had heard these tales quite frequently as I toured the city's scenic spots.

"At this point, I could really make it, not just here, but elsewhere, too—"

"Ah, that's enough talking," I cut him off and extended the palm of my hand. "You haven't forgotten your promise to me, have you?"

"....."

He wore a questionable expression for just a moment, then rummaged around in the pockets of his clothes and finally dropped some money into my hand. "Here. Twenty percent of today's take."

It was a gold coin.

In other words, he had made five gold coins in just one day.

That's quite a take, huh?

"Thanks."

"But, Miss Witch, it's really incredible. To come up with

such a good scheme using my appearance... I mean, being able to earn five coins in one day so quickly and easily, it sure is a witch's idea. Of course, you could also see this take as owing to my own genius, too!"

"You're getting carried away."

"But it's the truth, right? I knew it! I'm a genius at playing a werewolf!"

"You jest. If I felt like it, I could make twice what you do in a day."

"Huh? Doing what?"

"That's a secret."

Then I carefully placed the gold coin into my wallet.

"Heh-heh-heh...now I'm a top-notch werewolf, too..."

"Don't you mean 'goblin'?"



Several more days passed.

A certain rumor had become the talk of the town.

"Hey, have you heard?" "Sounds like he appeared again, the goblin man." "I'm scared of being attacked by the goblin! Let's go home!" "What should we do if we're attacked by the goblin?" "I heard he'll run away if you pay." "What kind of goblin is he?" "Dunno." "So it's best to carry money with me for now?" "Seems so."

Indeed, it seemed word of his behavior had made it to every corner of town, and I also overheard people saying he was walking around attacking people for money.

Already, the people of the city were growing less and less afraid and more and more annoyed and confused by the legendary goblin.

It wouldn't be long now.

"My, my. What's going on, everyone? You seem to be troubled over something."

Wearing a big smile, I approached a group gossiping

about the goblin man. The people took one look at my attire and were all too eager to tell me about the situation. "Ah, well, you see..."

My position as a witch was very convenient at times like these.

I kindly listened to what they had to say, chiming in with an exaggerated reaction from time to time. I was already quite familiar with the situation, but it was interesting to hear the story from the other side.

Then, after the crowd had complained about the goblin man for a while, I turned to them with an offer. "Well. That does sound difficult. By the way, I'm a witch who makes her living exterminating goblins. If you like, I can take care of this one for you. And I'm willing to do it for a meager ten gold pieces."



CHAPTER 11

Retroactive Grief

There was a lovely city called "the Clock Village of Rostolf," inconspicuously seated on a wide prairie belt.

Tall houses stood in neat order, and in the center of the city was a plaza, where stood a large clock tower, looming over all. At the exact moment when the girl took a seat on a bench in the plaza, the hands of the clock tower were pointing straight up at the blue sky, and the sound of a chime marking noon rang out across the country.

Distant birds scattered into the air, startled by the loud yet dignified chime that nevertheless caused everything nearby to tremble.

The girl was watching the situation idly.

She had ash-gray hair and lapis-colored eyes and was in her late teens.

She was a witch and a traveler.

The girl let out a sigh, as if the beautiful cityscape was very calming to her heart.

"...I'm hungry."

My mistake.

She was simply hungry.

"No money..."

And she had simply run out of money.

.....

Well then.

Who on earth could this girl be, this witch tormented by hunger and poverty in the middle of a beautiful cityscape?

"....."

That's right. She's me.

Though I wish she weren't.

I'm gonna cry.

It's not easy to tell you how I got to this point. Honestly, I hadn't been paying any attention to my finances. It happens to the best of us.

Well, I continued my travels, thinking it would be all right for me to make money in the next place I visited. When I arrived here, I happened to take in a play on the subject of the "District Two Killer," which was advertised as a famous local attraction, and then when I went to buy some bread from a roadside bread shop, still thinking about how interesting the play had been, I realized I had actually used up a lot of my money.

All that was left in my wallet were several copper coins, just barely enough to keep me alive, and nothing else. In other words, the ticket for the play had been more expensive than expected.

And that was how I ran out of money.

"....."

That story was easier to tell than I thought it would be.
And it had a very self-centered conclusion.

Since there's no helping it, now I'm walking around the city, with the clock tower looking down on me, hoping for a moneymaking opportunity to fall into my lap.

Apparently, this town really likes this "District Two Killer" thing, because posters for the aforementioned play are plastered all over town. Come to think of it, I remember the playhouse being full when I saw the show.

"Hey, did you see the play?" "I did, I did. The final execution scene was especially great!" "It was incredible how she died so brutally, wasn't it?" "I know!"

What the heck are you talking about? First of all, aren't you just agreeing with one another?

I had a strong urge to question the other theatergoers.

To relay the contents of the play would be no easy feat. Nah, that's not the case. This one was a straightforward depiction of a serial killer's life. A common, sad tale. Although dramatized for the stage, it seemed to be largely

based on a true story.

If I were to tell you the tale, it would go a little something like this:

Ten years ago, there was a young girl named Selena. She was living an average life in an average household. One day, a burglar broke into her family's unremarkable home, and her parents, who were in the house at the time, were murdered. Selena, who happened to have been out, survived, but she lost her parents.

The pitiful girl was taken in by an uncle.

However, her woes were not over. Her uncle treated her very cruelly. Selena harbored darkness within her heart and began to hate people. She grew to despise the miserable world, from which there was no escape.

Eventually, her impulses took shape, and she stabbed her uncle. The uncle died. From that point on, she continued down a dark path. She found that she enjoyed killing people, so she began committing murders more frequently, one after the other. Before you knew it, she was being called the "District Two Killer."

But all evil people eventually fall.

Three years ago, Selena had been captured by a young genius witch, the Lavender Witch Estelle, and executed. With this, the country became just a little bit more peaceful.

And they all lived happily ever after(?)

It was an unfortunate yet very commonplace tale of the beginning and end of an evil life.

"...Hmm."

However, serial killers exist outside most human logic and thus seem to fascinate people. For example, when I headed for a bookstore, it was overflowing with books either detailing the deeds of Selena the killer or tossing out wild theories like, "In truth, wasn't the District Two Killer a good person?" To make matters worse, that one had a "BESTSELLER!" sign.

Geez...

How on earth did it come to this?

I tried asking the opinion of the shopkeeper, who was dusting the tops of the books.

"I don't really get it, either. I guess people capable of calmly pulling off things that most can't, whether they're good or evil, can be very interesting, I suppose."

"Huh."

"I guess that's why the books sell."

"I see."

I felt conflicted. I thought I understood, but I couldn't be sure.

After that, the shopkeeper asked, "So will you buy one?" and I showed him the contents of my wallet. "If you're just window-shopping, get out of here!" he shouted angrily.

Eek!

Of course, District Two of the Clock Village of Rostolf, where the killer had done her bloody work, was jam-packed, to the point where it seemed as if it could be called holy ground for fans.

"Look! This is where Selena killed someone!" "Amazing! Ah, so she murdered someone here, huh?" "I feel like there's a dangerous aura hanging over the place!" "Let's lie down." "Great idea! We can pretend we were the ones who got killed!"

I was starting to grow a little concerned. *Each and every one of these people is crazy! I mean, is it okay to just lie there? It's still the ground.*

I shot an anguished look at the people as I passed them by.

Selena's quite popular for someone irredeemably evil.

I really did not understand it.

"....."

Well, since the enthusiasm in town was already so high, though, it seemed likely that the solution to my financial woes lay in following the traces of the District Two Killer.

I noticed that, amid the many posters for the play that lined the alleyway, there was a single copy of a different advertisement.

It read:

NOW HIRING MAGES FOR VERY SHORT-TERM WORK! THIS IS YOUR CHANCE TO MAKE A LOT OF MONEY!

A lot of money? Well, now I'm interested.

“.....Hmm.”

What's more, the name on the poster had caught my eye.

INTERESTED INDIVIDUALS SHOULD COME INSIDE AT ONCE.
(WINDOW-SHOPPERS: GET OUT OF HERE, PLEASE.)

That's what was written.

Beneath it was a scribbled signature.

It was a name I had seen before.

The Lavender Witch Estelle.



Even though I was more than a little skeptical, my curiosity and my desire for money hedged out any doubts in my mind, and in the end, I found myself knocking on the door of that house.

She came out right away.

“Hey, hey. Hi there. Nice to meet you. Who are you?”

The door opened, and a girl stared at me with golden eyes as her shoulder-length lavender hair swayed in the breeze. Her robe and pointy hat were also lavender, as if to match her hair color. A star-shaped brooch dangled from the tip of her hat.

“Hello. My name is Elaina. I saw the poster outside and came.”

“You. You're a witch, right? You've got the aura.”

"And you're Estelle, right? You've got the aura."

"That's my name outside on the poster, isn't it?"

"And you can see that I'm a witch just by looking at me, can't you?"

"Hmm, well..." She raised her eyebrows just a tiny bit and let out a laugh. "Well, by knocking on the door of my house, at the very least, I can assume that you're interested in the job, right?"

"I'm interested in making money."

"So you're looking for work."

"If I could, I'd like to make money without working."

"Not very motivated..." She let out a defeated sigh. "Okay. Fine. Even an unmotivated witch is still a witch. Come on in."

"Pardon the intrusion."

With that, she easily drew me into her house.

Even though I still knew nothing about the job.



Her house was certainly a sight. To put it kindly, it was nice and neat. To put it unkindly, the place was practically empty. Aside from some lavender flowers set beside the window, the furniture was rather minimal.

"Go ahead, sit there."

At Estelle's invitation, I had a seat on the sofa.

Belatedly, she carried over two teacups and sat across from me.

"Thank you." I bowed and peered into the cup at the black tea that had been set before me. "Well then, regarding the remuneration for the job..." I quickly got to the topic at hand.

"So you're more concerned about the payment than the task, huh...?" Astonished, she gave a weary smile. "You look quite young. How old are you?"

"Eighteen this year."

"Oh-ho! And when did you become a witch?"

"When I was fourteen."

"Ah. Only one year behind me."

"...By the way, how old were you when you became a witch's apprentice?"

"I think I was ten."

"In other words, it took you three years, between becoming an apprentice and becoming a full-fledged witch, is that right?"

"That's what it means. I first started practicing magic when I was eight, and in two years, I became an apprentice. Three years after that, I became a witch."

"Well, I became a witch in one year. You're two years behind me."

"....."

After a brief moment of silence, I said, "How old are you now?"

"I'm nineteen."

"Ah. One year older than me."

"...Hey. Are you making fun of me?"

"No, no. Not at all." Then I got back to the topic. "So what kind of job is this? Then you can tell me the details about the pay."

"...Since you seem to be most concerned about the money, how about I start there?"

Estelle placed a bundle on top of the table and slid it over to me. Once it had left her hand, the soft bundle collapsed under its own weight and a clinking sound came from within.

A sign that it's full of money...!

I unwrapped it right away.

"....."

It was, in fact, a ton of money. Even more than I had expected, actually.

The bundle contained a small fortune in gold coins. There

were too many to count. It was so much money that I couldn't possibly hold it in both hands.

I quickly surmised that I could live for at least three years on such a fortune, even if I went on one extravagant spending spree after another.

I was shocked, speechless.

"That's the pay, contingent on success. If you safely complete your task, I'll give you all of it."

"Are you serious?"

"Very serious."

"....."

Even I was at a loss, faced with such a fortune. "Um, what kind of job do I need to do to earn this much?"

"Hmm? You're not having second thoughts, are you? You'll be fine. I just want you to accompany me, Elaina."

"Accompany, huh...? To what kind of place are we going?"

"Here." She pointed her finger down as she answered.

"Um, inside the teacup?"

"Not there, under that."

"Meaning?"

"We're going to visit this city. To be more accurate, I want to visit this city as it was ten years ago."

"Ten years ago...? What are you going to—wait, first of all, how are you planning to get there?"

"You sure do ask a lot of questions." She laughed quietly. "You see, I've been working on a spell that will allow me to travel back in time, to ten years ago when I first started working as a witch in this country. To go back ten years and avoid the unhappy ending. Say, Elaina, do you know what was in this very spot ten years ago?"

"This city, but ten years younger?"

"Not only that."

"....."

"In this city, ten years ago, that girl was here. She was here, and things were still normal."

Then she spoke the girl's name.

Another name I remembered.



Apparently, Estelle and Selena had been childhood friends.

They had been close since they were small, and everyone who knew them said they seemed just like real sisters. One half of the pair was a genius mage. The other half was an ordinary girl. On that point, they didn't bear the slightest resemblance, but even so, the two of them were very, very close, unconcerned about who could or couldn't use magic.

Then, eleven years ago, one year before Selena's parents died, the two friends were separated.

Estelle, overflowing with genius as a young mage, had left the Clock Village of Rostolf to study magic in another country, intent on one day becoming a great witch. The two of them were pulled apart.

Estelle devoted herself to her training for five long years and eventually graduated from apprentice to full-fledged witch.

Of course, the abilities of the genius Estelle were highly valued everywhere, including the Clock Village. As soon as she returned to her hometown, she was summoned by the king, who asked her to take a position as the city's resident witch. It was an incredible honor. She accepted immediately.

The first thing that Estelle had wanted to do was to share her happy news with her dear friend Selena. However, she knew that her former childhood friend had completely changed. Five whole years had passed, and Selena had become a serial killer, reveling in her evil deeds.

Mourning her friend's descent into darkness, Estelle tried many times to bring Selena back, but each attempt ended fruitlessly. She even tried an intervention, but nothing could reach her old friend. No matter what she

tried, Selena still saw her as just one more part of the world she despised.

And so Estelle had started working on a new spell, spending every free moment perfecting the magic.

It was a spell to reverse time.

Her plan was to travel back in time and undo the cause of Selena's madness.

"While I was away, my friend suffered a terrible tragedy, so you see, I want to rescue her."

"When I came to this country, the first thing I did was see a play about Selena, and—"

"Well then, you already know. Selena died three years ago. She's not here anymore."

"She was executed, if I remember correctly."

"That's right. I'm the one who executed her. After chasing her for three years, I finally caught her. I thought there might be a chance that I could bring the old Selena back, but it was no use. I had no choice. The king and all the people, they urged me on and forced my hand. In the end, I was the one who put her to death."

"....."

"So I want to make things right. I can't stand living in a world without her anymore," Estelle said, biting her lip, her face contorting in pain.

I brought my now-cool tea to my lips, as a way of averting my eyes from her sorrowful expression, and then answered, "I understand the situation. However, I don't really get what you intend to do exactly. Assuming you return to the past, why do you need my help?"

Estelle suddenly sprung up from the couch and opened a door in the rear of the room. I could see two chairs sitting next to each other in the gloomy chamber beyond.

Even farther behind the two chairs was a large furnace.

"The spell I have created is not such a simple thing, and it was not achieved without sacrifice."

"...Meaning...?"

"When they don't have enough magical energy, mages can sacrifice something of theirs to create some, right?"

".....Yes, that's true."

For example, one's voice or one's own memory.

Mages can conjure massive amounts of magical energy if they are willing to pay the cost. Since it's quite dangerous—or honestly, since I've never cared that much about making something happen—I've never done it myself.

"You see, over the course of the last three years, I've been siphoning my own blood and stockpiling every scrap of my magical energy. It will take an astounding amount of power to travel ten years into the past."

"....."

"But my blood and the accumulated magical energy aren't sufficient. I'm still off by just a little bit."

"Exactly how much are we talking?"

"Enough that if I were to pour every ounce of magic I have left into the spell, it would just barely be sufficient."

So what you're saying is that...

"In other words, you'll be tapped out after you return to the past, so you want a witch by your side to protect you in case anything happens, is that right?"

"Mm. Close, but not quite." Estelle pulled two rings out of her pocket. "Elaina, if you will just put on this ring and travel back in time with me, that'll be enough. I'll sort the rest out somehow."

As she spoke, she pressed a ring into my hand. It was pretty, a small ring encrusted with jewels. It looked just the right size to wear on my pinky finger.

"And this is?"

"I made it while I was in training, to make Selena happy. With these, you can share magic between two people. I thought for sure that if Selena and I wore these rings, she might also be able to cast spells."

"....." I put the ring onto my smallest finger. "So if I wear this, you'll be able to draw on my magic after we travel to

the past, is that right?"

"That's exactly it. I want to meet Selena when she's still healthy and sane."

"...Is that so?"

She nodded slowly at my words and then asked, "How about it? Will you do it?"

I raised a hand to the ceiling. The ring sparkled on my pinky finger. "Well, I am a little curious about what this country looked like ten years ago."

I am a traveler, after all.

We moved to the gloomy room in the back, seating ourselves on the two chairs next to the furnace. I had already more or less guessed that we would be able to go back to the past by sitting in these chairs.

"Ready?" Estelle looked at me, gripping her wand in both hands. I nodded. "All right then, here we go." She pointed her wand at the furnace behind us. Her hands were trembling slightly.

"...Are you all right? Your hands are shaking."

"I'm fine. It's because of my anemia."

"You're sweating, too."

"...That's the anemia, too."

"...You're not all right, are you?"

"But we're doing this. If I don't do it when I can, I'll lose my chance."

"....."

"Ready?"

She asked a second time.

"Are you ready, Estelle?"

"Totally," she answered. "I've been ready for three years."

She waved her wand, and a bluish-white light shot out, aimed at the furnace.

Immediately, the lid to the furnace blew open, and the

streak of blue-white light coming from her wand stretched toward it, undulating like a snake. The beam of light started looping around, forming a half-sphere with us in the center then, finally, closed us up inside it.

My vision was filled with the mysterious illumination, seeming at once both cold and warm.

Watching distantly from atop her chair, Estelle said, "Oh, sorry. I forgot one thing."

"What's that?"

I cocked my head.

"Thank you," she said, and she closed her eyes.

I smiled at her.

"Don't mention it."



I opened my eyes to the deep chiming of a bell.

It was like waking from a deep slumber. I found myself looking at scenery no different than before. For better or worse, it was just a plain room.

Could this really be ten years in the past? Maybe it was all just a big light show.

"Seems like we were successful, doesn't it?" In contrast to my doubts, Estelle appeared to hold a certain degree of conviction. "Look, Elaina. The room has returned to how it was ten years ago."

"Sorry, I can't tell what's different."

"It's totally different. Here, and there, and everywhere."

"Nothing's changed from before, has it?"

"Well, it looks completely different to me."

I suppose that's natural, since she sees it every day. It makes sense that I wouldn't be able to notice the changes.

"At least, it looks just the same to me as when I first arrived."

"In that case, why don't we go outside and check?"

Estelle gave her lavender-colored hair a little flip, rose from her chair, and headed outside of the house.

I followed her, closing the front door behind us.

"Hmm..." *Well, what do we have here?* "I think it might be a little different."

Outside Estelle's house, in the alleyway, the walls should have been lined with row after tedious row of posters for the play, but there wasn't a single advertisement in sight.

And that wasn't the only change. The city itself, which I had expected to look more or less the same, was strangely different from my recollections. For example, the name of the shop that had tables spilling into the alleyway was different. The color of the flowers blooming on the windowsill of the house was different.

The cityscape before me was rife with minute alterations.

The clock tower that could be seen over the rooftops continued to keep the time, just as it had when I had stared vacantly at it earlier. The trailing note of the chime indicating five o'clock rang in my ears.

Estelle followed my line of sight and said, "We've only got one hour. When the six o'clock bell finishes ringing, we will be sent back ten years into the future."

"Will one hour be enough?"

"Unfortunately, I only have enough magical energy to keep us in the past for a single hour, but that should be plenty." She then said, "If I have just that much time, I can make it so the next ten years simply never happen."

Walking down the alley, Estelle opened a notebook. "The robbers should enter Selena's house twenty minutes from now. Let's go stop them."

"What's in that notebook?"

"Since I was working for the government, you see, I used my position to dig up all kinds of information about the incident ten years ago."

“Huh.”

“In this notebook, I’ve collected evidence and eyewitness accounts. It says that in about twenty minutes, a band of thugs wearing black hoods will force their way into Selena’s house. They will murder Selena’s parents and take everything of value.”

“Hmm.”

“If we ambush the robbers, that should fix everything.”

“You’re planning to drive them away?”

“Of course. That’s why we came.” Estelle nodded vigorously. “If her parents don’t die, there’s no way that Selena’s life will go off the rails.”

“I see.”

And I suppose that, by doing all this, we’ll also bring back all the people that Selena would have killed? I wonder what that will mean for the future. If a famous serial killer is never born, then won’t the future we return to in ten years look quite different?

At the very least, I guess they won’t be putting on that play.

I was deep in thought when Estelle spoke to me matter-of-factly. “Well, I say that, but even if I change the past here, once we go back, our future will be the same.”

“Huh...? What do you mean?”

“In other words, even if I meddle in Selena’s past here, the future where I killed her will not change. See, when I was researching time travel magic, I read through all kinds of literature on the subject. Every person who had successfully cast a spell to go back to the past all said the same thing: ‘I went back to the past, but nothing changed.’”

“.....”

I had also done a little bit of research regarding spells for reversing time. Like the spell I use to heal wounds and the like—that could be said to be a type of time-reversing spell.

“So what are you telling me? That even if you try to change the past, something will cause events to play out the

same way?"

Are we really continuing this conversation if, no matter what we do, no matter what we try, it all ends the same?

"That's not it," Estelle answered. Her light purple hair bobbed. "First of all, we won't be able to confirm whether we did, in fact, change the past. Our past is already settled, so it can't be changed, no matter what."

"Hmmm...? I'm sorry, what on earth do you mean?" Wrinkles lined my forehead.

Estelle let out a little sigh of exasperation. "Let me explain it in a way that's easy to understand. We'll refer to the world we were living in as World A, okay? The events that occur ten years in the past in World A are already set, and we can't do anything to change them. See, for the world we're from to exist at all, we can't have done anything to interfere with the past."

"Well then, what on earth is the world we're in now?"

"A past that we are able to interfere with, I suppose. Let's call this World B, shall we? We were originally in World A, ten years in the future, right? Since we've come back to the past, this world and that world have split. Now we've created a World B. However, when we go back, it will have to be to World A. We can only return to the world we're originally from."

"....."

"So you see, no matter what we do in this world, we'll have no way of knowing how it turns out."

I was finally beginning to understand her explanation. That is, if I could take what she said as fact.

"So what you're saying is that we can't change our own past, no matter how hard we try, is that right?"

She nodded in the affirmative. "That's right."

"Umm, this might be kind of rude of me to ask, but in that case, does any of this mean anything?"

"That really is rather rude..."

"But it's the truth, isn't it? If your hypothesis is correct?"

What on earth are you thinking, meddling in the past for the sake of an unchangeable future? Won't messing around with time magic just make the future you couldn't salvage that much more miserable?

However...

Ignoring my uneasiness, Estelle shook her head. "There is meaning to it," she said. "It'll be enough for me just to know that there is a future where I was able to save her."



After that, we walked for a while, gazing together at all the differences in the past.

That building over there is a bread shop now, but it's closed in the future. I heard that the owner's wife ran out one night.

You see that kid over there swinging a sword around? Ten years from now, he'll make a splendid soldier. Apparently, it was his dream to join the military.

Estelle cheerfully told me this and that as we walked on.

"By the way, we'll be at Selena's house soon—"

Estelle broke off mid-sentence and suddenly came to a stop.

When I turned around to look at her, wondering what the heck had happened, I saw Estelle with her eyes wide, mouth hanging open in shock. Her attention was fixed farther down the street.

"What is it...?" I twisted my head around to follow her gaze.

A little girl had appeared. She had long, glossy hair (almost the same lapis color as my own eyes) and looked to be about ten years old. She was carrying lots of large parcels in both hands, perhaps returning from a shopping trip. She was walking along absentmindedly.

"Selena...?"

Estelle called out to the little girl. Her voice was hoarse, like she was wringing it out of her chest. She ran up to the girl, dropped to her knees in the alley, and embraced her joyfully.

"Eh...? Huh? Um, who are you, lady? Stop it, I'm scared!" The girl's eyes were wide in panic at the sudden development. She was obviously very frightened.

"Selena. It has been so long. I'm sorry. You endured so much pain, and I never could save you. I'm really, really sorry."

"Um, lady, who are you...?"

"Wait here, okay? I'm definitely going to save you."

"...Are you a member of some new religion or something?"

Selena was a very levelheaded child for her age.

Releasing the little girl, who was suspicious enough to speak so directly, Estelle said, "Mm. That was a bit untoward, wasn't it? I'm sorry."

"It hasn't gotten any better."

"I'm really sorry. I just wanted to hold you for a second, that's all."

"Are you a new kind of pervert or something?"

"I happen to be someone who came from the future."

"Wow..." Selena was obviously trying to wrap the conversation up quickly. "Well, that's great, but I'm actually in a hurry right now, so...I'm sorry, but I don't have time to hang out with you, lady."

"...Mm. Sorry." Estelle frowned as Selena pushed past her coldly. The witch looked a little sad as she moved out of the girl's way.

Freed from Estelle's embrace, Selena disappeared down the alley, looking back over her shoulder many times to verify that the strange lady who had suddenly accosted her wasn't following.

"...Please wait, Selena," Estelle mumbled.

I could feel the unwavering determination in her words.

"Looks like you were treated pretty coldly."

"She was always like that. Even though she may be cold on the outside, though, she's a very kind girl inside. I was with her every day when we were small, you know, so I know her well."

Estelle gazed down the path Selena had taken, following her trail.

Her eyes were overflowing with affection.



We arrived at Selena's house and quickly put our scheme to rescue Selena's parents into action. The plan went something like this:

First of all, Estelle knocked on the door.

"Who is it?" Selena's father came out.

"Hi. I'm actually Estelle's older half-sister."

"Oh. You certainly do look just like Estelle. How exactly are you two related?"

"That's not really important right now."

"Are you sure it doesn't matter?"

"It's fine. I have a message from my parents, and I'd like you to listen to it."

"Hmm...what is it?"

"Apparently, they've got important business related to Estelle and are asking for both of you. They want you to come right away."

"What's this important business?"

"Who knows? I don't really know, myself."

"So you came all the way here to deliver a message that you don't know much about?"

"That's exactly what I did. Anyway, it sounds really urgent, so please come with me right away."

"...Hmm. What on earth could they be up to?"

We had concocted a story to draw Selena's parents out of

their house.

And we achieved our goal.

After that, the scenario was very simple. Estelle quietly told it to me as Selena's parents were preparing to leave.

"Elaina, you'll stand by inside Selena's house. I'm going to give you this notebook, so read it carefully and prepare yourself."

"What will you be doing, Estelle?"

"I'm going to protect Selena's parents. I don't know what's going to happen, now that we've changed their fates, I've got to keep them safe."

"....."

In other words, I was stuck with the annoying job.

So I waited alone in Selena's house, preparing for the arrival of the burglars.

To kill time, I idly flipped through the notebook Estelle had left behind, absently waiting for the moment to arrive.

"...Hmm."

Estelle's notebook detailed the events of ten years past—that is, the events that were about to transpire.

It would all happen several minutes from now. Burglars wearing black hoods would barge in through the front door and kill Selena's parents. After that, they would steal all the money and valuables before making their escape. Apparently, Selena's family was quite rich, and that's why their house was targeted.

Certainly, the closet I was currently hiding in was stuffed with expensive-looking clothes. The dining room I could see through the small, half-open door was also incredibly extravagant and was decorated with gold and other fancy accoutrements.

I see, so they seem to be common, money-grubbing thieves.

"....."

However, there was one detail about the incident that had been bothering me. Both of Selena's parents had been stabbed repeatedly with sharp knives. They had bled out from dozens of puncture wounds. It was a little much for a band of ordinary robbers.

Estelle also seemed to sense something was off about this. Toward the end of the notebook, she had written: *Possibly a grudge. The thieves' target wasn't the money but the parents?*

If that was true, I understood why Estelle had gone to guard the two of them, but she had left me here because it was still possible they were just ordinary robbers.

"...Hmm."

It seemed that theory could safely be abandoned.

The ring on my pinky finger had started glowing and was emitting tendrils of blue-white smoke, stretching toward the closet door.

I could feel the magical energy being sucked out of my body.

In short...

Estelle is using magic.

I feared that...

Estelle is facing off against the murderers.



She has her quirks, but Estelle is a witch.

She's a genius capable of traveling ten years into the past.

Could a band of ordinary robbers really give such an accomplished witch any trouble?

I didn't think so. According to the evidence on record, both of Selena's parents were stabbed by the same person. Even armed with a knife, the culprit would be no match for Estelle.

Consequently, I was quite calm.

Taking my time, I strolled through the evening townscape, following the blue-white smoke wafting from my ring.

This is such a pain. It would be great if she could have it all sorted out by the time I get there.

I was rather optimistic.

“.....”

However, I arrived at the scene at the exact moment the ring ceased drawing on my magical energy. I found myself staring down a grimy back alley, lined with countless trash cans, and realized that everything I had imagined, all my assumptions about this case, had been completely ill-informed.

We had been wrong about everything.

“.....”

Estelle and I had been utterly clueless.

“Ah. You’re the one who was with this woman earlier, aren’t you? Ahh, what a dilemma.”

Selena had not, in fact, been driven mad by the loss of her parents.

“What should I do? Shall I kill you, too?”

Even if you see someone every day, if they’re odd from the start, if the face they show the world is a fabrication, you won’t notice.

“Well, since you’ve seen me, I suppose I can’t let you live.”

In the back alley, where the rays of the setting sun did not reach, that girl’s mouth twisted into a warped little smile as she stared up at me. Her face and clothes were slick and spattered, and she clutched a dripping dagger. The girl, bathed in the blood of the three people lying at her feet, had been dyed red.

“I’m sorry, but you’ll have to die, too.”

It was the little girl whom we had just met some minutes earlier.

It was Selena herself.



It was easy to guess what had transpired before I arrived. Estelle had been on her guard for a robber in a black hood. She would never have suspected Selena.

"This one said something strange, like she was from the future or something, but is it the same for you? Huh, lady?"

Perhaps Selena had guessed something earlier, when Estelle had embraced her.

"...If I tell you that you're right, what are you going to do?"

"Doesn't really matter. Either way, I have to get rid of any witnesses."

"....."

"She's wearing a witch's brooch, so I expected her to be awfully strong. She wasn't much of anything, though. A trifle."

The girl spoke, turning surprisingly cold eyes toward Estelle, who lay at her feet.

"...Why did you kill your own parents?"

Selena's expression did not waver, even as she answered my question.

"The truth is, my parents were abusing me. So I killed them. Doesn't that make sense?"

"....."

"Ever since I was born, I've been bullied by my father and scolded by my mother. My father only ever gave me dirty looks, and my mother saw me as the other woman and was jealous. Of course, outside of the house, we played the loving family, but inside, our relationship was as twisted as could be."

"....."

"They broke me, so I broke them."

She wore a broad grin. It wasn't the sweet smile of a girl her age. It was a warped, repulsive mockery.

Selena slowly walked toward me.

"You surprised me, you know. The two of you came and interrupted my plan at just the right time."

"Your plan to put on a black hood and dress like a burglar?"

"That's right. As I suspected, you seem to know an awful lot about me. Is it because you came from the future?"

Even when the time had come, nobody had arrived to rob Selena's house. That must have been because the person who was supposed to break in had been somewhere else at the time.

"....."

The parcel Selena had been holding when we passed her earlier had fallen to the ground. It was lying there with a bit of black cloth sticking out.

"Hey, lady. If you really came from the future, then tell me something, will you? What kind of person will I become?"

"I am a traveler. I haven't spent much time in this city, so I don't really know what kind of person you turned out to be." I pulled out my wand and stood at the ready. "But I can tell you that ten years from now, when I visited this city, you had already been put to death."

"Oh? I was killed? By whom?"

"By your closest friend."

"I don't have any close friends."

"....."

"Ah, maybe you mean Estelle?" I nodded, and Selena clapped her hands, looking very, very happy. "Ah! I see, I see. I get it. The dead woman here is Estelle from ten years in the future?"

"....."

"I knew it! I thought she was." I didn't answer, but she must have taken my silence as confirmation. Still clapping

her hands delightedly, she tilted her head and asked, “But why was I killed?”

“Because you became a serial killer.”

“I became a serial killer?”

“Yes.”

The District Two Killer.

That was her future nickname.

Strangely, we hadn’t made it out of District Two. In the end, Estelle and I had been unable to prevent the birth of a psychopath. No, it’s not that we hadn’t been able to prevent it; we were already too late.





"I see. So I become a serial killer, do I? I understand."

We had traveled ten years into the past and found Selena already long broken.

Pointing at me with the knife, Selena suddenly leaped to her feet and rushed at me. "After all, who knew killing people would be this much fun!" she shouted.

"...!"

Then, just as I was leveling my wand at the girl closing in on me, something happened. Suddenly, the garbage cans lining the alley flew at Selena, slamming her against the wall. One after another, they smashed into her, bursting with rotten refuse and a terrible stench.

"...I won't forgive you."

The faint voice emanated from the other end of the stinking alley.

Gripping her wand in one trembling hand and compressing her bleeding midsection with the other, Estelle pushed to her feet. Battered as she was and despite her many wounds, she still lived.

"Ah-ha!" Selena looked up at Estelle from inside the rancid stink cloud. "What's this? So you're still alive. I'd better stab you a little mo—"

Estelle didn't wait to hear the end of the sentence. She waved her wand again, and balls of blue-white magical energy rained down on Selena like a hail of bullets.

The ring I was wearing shone brighter and brighter until it was dazzling.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!" Estelle screamed and waved her wand over and over again.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! It hurts! Oh, it hurts!" Even as orbs of magic crashed into her, Selena was still smiling.

"You tricked me this whole time? You made a fool of me? I thought we were friends!"

"Ah-ha-ha! Estelle is trying to kill me! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"I thought we were friends! I thought for sure you would

go back to being a good girl! This whole time, all along—you tricked me!"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ow! Ow, ow, ow, ow! Ha-ha-ha!"

"You...you monster...!"

Then Estelle stopped, still pointing her wand at Selena. The bluish-white magical energy reached out from the wand like a wisp and wrapped its tendrils around Selena's neck, squeezing tight.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha, ha—"

Estelle tilted the tip of the wand skyward until Selena was hauled up off the ground, legs dangling in the air.

"—ha, ha-ha."

Her repulsive laugh gradually withered away.

However...

Even as she wriggled her fingers, trying to grasp at the intangible threads, even as she spit foam from the corners of her mouth, Selena was still smiling.

Looking down at Estelle, she was definitely smiling.

"...You murderer," she whispered.

"....."

It sent chills up my spine.

If the horrible scene unfolding before my eyes continued, I would be able to do nothing but wait for the awful conclusion.

"Estelle, wait, please. Wait...this is..."

This is too much.

Even if you're dealing with a murderer, who would want things to end this way?

I put this ring on my finger. If I take it off, it should stop supplying Estelle with magical energy. I should at least be able prevent her from becoming a murderer.

And then, after that...

*After that, what on earth should I do? What kind of curtain should I bring down on a heartbreakin*g story like this?

.....

I suppose it was a trick of my imagination. The ring that was clinging to my pinky finger refused to come off. My hand must have been trembling so hard that I couldn't get ahold of it.

Apparently, I was more frightened of being here than I had thought.

While I was getting nowhere with the ring, Selena let out a hoarse shriek and started pawing wildly at her neck. Her voice was like a death wail, and the sound of it made me tug at my hand even more imperatively.

Several painfully long seconds passed before the ring feeding Estelle with magical energy finally came off. Tracing a red arc as it sailed through the air above the bloody scene, the ring clattered to the ground.

"Estelle! Please stop! You mustn't do this. This is..."

I tried reasoning with her.

I tried to get her to stop and think.

But the smoke tightening around Selena's throat did not disappear.

"I don't need my memories with you. I don't need anything. Everything about you should just disappear."

Even though the ring had, sure enough, come off. Even though it was no longer fueling Estelle with magical energy.

Where on earth is her power coming from?

"I should never have tried to help someone like you. I should never have thought twice about you. I should never have felt remorse over your death."

Estelle's eyes, filled with pain and resentment, looked a lot like Selena's.

At a loss for what to do, I just stood there in a daze, gripping my wand with a trembling hand. Confusion and fear bound me hand and foot, and I was frozen in place.

"Good-bye, Selena," Estelle whispered. Her expression grew calm, as if she had given up just about everything.

And then...

A bell rang.

As the chime of the bell reverberated through the city, marking the passage of an hour, a light enveloped me and Estelle. The world outside it gradually became hazy and disappeared.

The time limit.

The smell of blood and the girl's hoarse voice also faded.

Then, everything in front of my eyes melted into the fuzzy whiteness.

This was how the curtain came down on our story. We had traveled back in time to rescue a little girl, but in the end, we hadn't saved anyone at all.



The sound of the bell filled the air.

When I opened my eyes, I had returned to the original world—the reality Estelle had called World A—in other words, my world.

Familiar scenery filled my vision. The empty room. The chairs lined up together. The bouquet of lavender on the windowsill.

And Estelle next to me.

“.....”

She was staring up at the ceiling with vacant eyes. Her expression was blank.

I didn't know what she might be thinking or whether I should say something.

I just waited for the time to pass.

“...Huh? What was I doing?” Finally, she opened her mouth. “Why was I sitting here...? Huh? I can't remember.”

“...Estelle.”

“Ah, you are...Elaina, was it? What was I doing just now?”

“.....”

I didn't answer.

"I feel like I'm forgetting something...or someone...important...but what could it be? I can't remember. What was it?"

"Don't you remember about Selena...?" I asked.

"...? Who's that?"

The moment she returned to the future, Estelle had forgotten about Selena and our journey back ten years into the past.

While we were talking, I realized what had happened. When I removed the ring back in the alley, Estelle had already been producing her own magical energy using an extreme method.

She had transformed all the memories of her treasured friend into magic. She must have sacrificed a good portion of her most precious memories.

Now that we had returned to the future, she sat vacantly in a daze. "I just can't remember... It's all very foggy. Selena, huh...? Who was that?" She looked honestly confused. "Elaina, I just can't seem to remember. Who was that person to me?"

She searched my face with a puzzled expression.

I stood up to avoid her gaze and answered her with a few words.

"No one important. Not anymore."



The place was a lovely city called the Clock Village of Rostolf, inconspicuously seated on a wide prairie. Tall white houses stood in neat rows, and in the center of the city was a plaza, where a tall clock tower rose above it all.

Right as I was passing through the plaza, the chime indicating three o'clock rang out. Surprised by the loud sound, distant birds scattered into the air.

I turned around and watched them aimlessly.

“.....”

After all that, I had quickly taken my leave of the house, as if to run away. Of course, I hadn't taken the reward or anything. There was no way I could accept money for a past that didn't exist for her in the first place.

Plus, I hadn't upheld my end of the bargain.

Well, for starters...

Imagining that we could change the past, that we could go back and somehow make everyone happy, was probably a very foolish idea. The past is past, and though we might look back on it with regret, it's probably better not to try to redo it. Going back to fix human relationships is an altogether different matter than using a spell to manipulate time and heal wounds.

However, even if we'd had any hope of changing things, I had been totally useless while we were in the past.

I had been afraid.

Seeing people killed right before my eyes had been too terrifying, too sad.

Even if, after traveling for so long, I've become a little desensitized to such things.

I'm an ordinary traveler and a witch. That doesn't mean I can do anything or that everything will always work out in the end.

In traveling to the past, I was reminded of my own immaturity.

To a painful degree.

“.....”

Tepid tears followed the contours of my cheeks. As if trying to turn away from my own blubbering, I stared up at the clock tower. The trailing notes of the bell still hung in the air. The clock continued marking time as it always had.

Without ever going backward.

“...Shall we carry on?”

And then, I walked away.

Without looking back, I took one resolute step after another.



CHAPTER 12

The Wall That Travelers Inscribe



I found myself in a country divided in two. The eastern and western halves did not get along, so the people had built a wall straight down the center and agreed to have nothing more to do with each other.

Of course, the wall was still standing when I visited the east side of that country. The tidy gray barrier completely blocked off the other half. It was just as cold and imposing as the other side to which it was preventing access.

When I touched it, it was quite chilly and felt nice.

“Oh, what pain, what a pain. This thing is just the worst.” As I stood there rubbing my cheeks against the cool stone to kill time, a government official of the eastern side had come up behind me and was grumbling complaints.

With my cheek still stuck to the wall, I asked, “Just what is so irksome?”

“What are you doing there...?” The official shook his head. “Well, the truth is, you see, the relationship between the eastern and western halves of our country is pretty bad. I mean, if you ask me, every single person on the other side of that wall should just go straight to hell, but the thing is... have a look here. Don’t you think it’s a bit of a pain having this big wall running through the middle of everything?”

“Oh....? Whatever do you mean...?”

When I listened to what he had to say, it was easy enough to understand. It sounded like the eastern and the western sides of the country each hated the thought of losing out to the other more than anything.

Both this side of the wall and the other had the same

drab, gray appearance, which was exactly what upset the official. He was certain his half of the country was much better than its counterpart, but there was no way to demonstrate that.

In other words, what the official wanted to say was: *“Take a look at this wall. It is the greatest proof that our side surpasses our neighbors. That’s what I want to be able to boast.”*

That seemed to be the situation, plain and simple. It was a pretty mild dilemma. You could say that it was a frustration typical of citizens who had built a wall that was too gray when what they actually wanted was to make everything black and white.

“From what I heard, you are a traveling witch, are you not? Don’t you have any good ideas for us?” the government official continued.

“.....”

For a few moments, I pressed my cheek against the wall and hummed.

“Well, I don’t *not* have an idea.”

I showed him one suggestion.

As it turned out, the people on the other side of the country were exactly the same.

“Hi there. So you’re a traveling witch, huh? Have a look at this wall, won’t you? Don’t you think it’s just awful? I’ve actually got something I want to discuss with you.”

I visited the other side of the wall—that is, the western side of the country—and pressed my cheek against the wall just like I had on the eastern side.

That’s when an official of the western government, sure enough, made the same request of me that his counterpart on the eastern side had.

As before, I groaned, and after acting as if I were giving it a little thought, I presented a proposal to the official from

this side as well.

"Well, I don't *not* have an idea," I said.

The government official's eyes sparkled with joy.
"Really?!"

"Yes. I don't not have one, but there's a condition. Mr. Official, do you have a knife?"

"Hmm? Um, I do, but..." With a skeptical look, the government official handed me the knife at his hip. "What on earth are you planning to do with it?"

"I'm going to do this."

As I spoke, I stabbed the knife into the wall.

Scraping and scratching, I carved into the gray stone.

The official's eyebrows knit as if to say, "*What in the world is this girl doing?*" as the knife in my hand inscribed a single statement into the wall.

This side of this country is really splendid. —a wandering witch

"...What is this exactly?" The official continued frowning. He was apparently a bad guesser.

"To be brief, this wall is a symbol, separating this side and that side, but at the same time, you want it to show how magnificent your side is, right? So you should get visiting travelers to carve their words onto the wall. The more carvings you have, the greater your side will seem."

"But...I'm not the biggest fan of that method..." Not only was the western official knitting his brow, but his forehead began to wrinkle.

He went out of his way to ask me, so I showed him a good way, and this is the reaction I get?

I fought to keep myself from shrugging in exasperation. "Oh, come to think of it..." I said, acting as if I had suddenly remembered something before tossing out the magic words.

"The other side of the wall already has many inscriptions from travelers who have visited."

From what I heard after I'd left, a new custom had started in that country of handing knives to visitors and having them carve their words onto the wall.

It's a wonder that those people, who were ready to argue over just about everything else, would happily agree on this one matter.

Excerpt from Chapter 5 of *The Adventures of Niche*



When she visited that country, together with her teacher, it had not been long since she had become a witch's apprentice.

Their trip had begun when her teacher said, as if she had suddenly remembered something, "Oh, come to think of it, they have some really good food in that country. Oh, I want to eat something tasty... Let's head there right away."

The girl had cocked her head, very confused by the sudden proposal, thinking, *What's she talking about all of a sudden?* Though she didn't really have any alternatives to suggest.

So the girl nodded at her teacher's unexpected whim, and the two of them decided to visit. However, since the teacher was the one who had proposed the trip, the girl used her position as a designated accomplice and replied with, "I'll go if the food is your treat." She got a very nasty look in return.

After this and that, the two of them flew on their brooms over wide prairies for several days before arriving at their destination.

As the teacher had said, the cuisine there was incredibly, unbelievably good.

The teacher hadn't said anything about it before they came, but in the center of that particular country was a

large barrier, separating it into two halves.

“.....”

“.....”

The two of them looked up at that wall.

One of them had ash-colored hair. She was a young witch. She looked to be in her mid-teens. The other one was that witch's pupil. She was a witch's apprentice with beautiful, long, smooth hair that was black as night.

Now then, on to the main issue:

The girl, the apprentice.

The one whose desire to become a full-fledged witch grew stronger day by day as she studied under her teacher. Who on earth could she be?

Please answer in no more and no fewer than four letters.

...All right, time's up. Let's group up and compare answers.

Who was she?

That's right, she's—

“Fran.”

I turned around when I heard my teacher call my name.

“Yes, miss?”

“Look at this wall. Incredible, isn't it?”

My teacher was quite excited.

“Haven't you been here before?”

My teacher shook her head at my question, looking like she wanted to say, “*Oh, you really don't understand anything, do you,*” and shrugged. “I'm telling you it's gotten even more incredible since I came here.”

Many words, too many to count, were carved into the wall. They read *This country is the best!* and *This is the first time in my life I've been to such a great country!* and *We're getting married soon!* and *Best travel buddies forever!* and so on, each message unrelated to the next. All kinds of people had carved mementos of their visits.

This wall had apparently been brand new when my teacher first visited.

"Oh, is that so?" I replied.

She continued proudly, "Do you know who started the trend of carving messages into this wall? That's right, it was me," she boasted, using a strange expression.

I didn't really understand what she was saying, so I let it slide.

"But what do you mean? What's the purpose of carving words into the wall?"

"There isn't really a reason. The people on this side of the country wanted to compete with the people on the opposite side. They wanted to prove their side was the best. That's why they encouraged people to leave messages on their side of the wall. And on the opposite side, they did exactly the same thing."

"Hmm, hmm..."

So, frankly speaking, it's a popularity contest.

I see.

But if it's a popularity contest, that poses a slight problem.

I pulled on my teacher's sleeve. "So which side is better?" I asked.

"Goodness, you really want to know which side is the most popular?"

"Of course I do. The more popular side is obviously going to have the better food."

"....."

After being silent for a short while, my teacher made another nasty face. "How are you still hungry...?"

I'll skip ahead and tell you the results. After examining both sides of the wall, it turned out that—

"They're virtually identical."

Similar phrases had been carved in similar numbers. *We're going to get married!* changed to *You're kidding, right?* *Divorce is the way to go.* while *Best travel buddies*

forever! had become *What a terrible joke. Just break up, already.* There were a few differences, but it was more or less identical.

In other words, it was impossible to tell whether the eastern or the western half of the country was better based solely on the wall.

Well, we can probably make a distinction judging by the cuisine, I thought, so I dragged along my reluctant teacher and headed for a restaurant on the opposite side of the country, only to find that the food there was equally delicious.

With full stomachs, we stood in front of the wall once again.

“I ate too much... I can’t walk...”

While I was satisfied to have eaten so much, my teacher looked like she was going to be sick.

“But, miss, what does it mean that both sides are exactly the same?”

“.....” My teacher rubbed her belly, let out a sigh, and looked at me. “Most of the people who thought that one side was great also found the other side great; that’s what it means.”

In other words, there was no difference between the two rivals. That was the only truth.

However, that was also as it should be. The country was now divided into eastern and western halves, but originally, they had been united. They had ended up splitting apart only out of a sincere desire not to be bested by their neighbors.

Both sides had developed together, just like a mirror image.

“...Why doesn’t either side realize they’re headed in the same direction as their competition?”

My teacher smiled softly. “Isn’t it obvious?” she answered. “It’s because they’ve never taken a look at the other side of the wall. Neither of them has.”

“I’ve heard it’s a wondrous place where a great gray wall towers in the center of the country.”

Following these rumors, a single witch landed her broom in front of the nation in question.

She was a traveling witch. She wore a black robe and a pointy black hat, plus a star-shaped brooch that was her proof of being a witch. She gave the impression of being in her late teens, though she looked rather young for her age.

“Wow. This is incredible!”

The girl stood in front of the enormous wall and mumbled to herself. Messages from all kinds of people who had visited were inscribed there.

By the way...

That traveling witch...

That girl, pretending to be a wandering witch...

Who on earth could she be?

That’s right, it’s...

...Just kidding! It’s me! It’s Saya!

“Oh, you’re a witch from the United Magic Association, right? What do you think of the wall?” A government official approached me. Today I had been dispatched on request from municipal officials.

“It’s incredible. You can see that a huge number of people have visited this country!”

I’m traveling as a hobby, but for work, I fix people’s problems in all sorts of locales.

Basically, the United Magic Association goes around dealing with incidents and accidents caused by magic, but we also accept commissions for issues that seem like they can be solved with magic.

For example, commissions like this.

“Madam Witch, I believe you’ve already looked over the request form, but please do something about this wall. For

ten years, we have allowed visitors to inscribe messages on the wall at the suggestion of another traveling witch...but lately, perhaps because fads come and go with the passage of time, there haven't been many visitors who want to write new messages. It seems our wall has gone out of fashion."

I suppose he's thinking that something that was started by a witch can be fixed by a witch?

In other words, it seems the people of this country have gotten it into their heads that they can just let traveling witches handle all their problems while they coast along, living the sweet and easy life.

They must really want this wall to remain popular if they were willing to go to the trouble of requesting a witch. Honestly, I think it's impressive enough as is.

"How about it, Lady Witch? Don't you have some sort of good idea?"

"Hmm..."

I stared at the wall and thought for a short while.

The barrier bore many messages from many travelers. There were all sorts of words and impressions.

Hmm? Huh? What's this here? It says: This side of this country is really splendid. —a wandering witch.

Compared to the rest of the carvings, this looked like it had been written a long time ago, and given that it was enclosed by a gold frame, it was clearly somehow more important than the rest.

"Ah, that there is the very first message, written by the witch who came up with the idea of carving on the wall. Thanks to her, our country has flourished ever since."

Ohh? Well, well. So an amazing witch visited this place, hmm?

Huh?

"Wait, this handwriting, something about it is..."

It was slightly different than I remembered, but I was sure I had seen it before. Specifically, several years earlier in a particular inn in a particular country. I had no doubt

that the traveler who carved this line was a witch with ash-colored hair and lapis-colored eyes. It had to have been the work of my beloved Elaina—no, upon closer examination, I was picking up only a partial Elaina vibe, so it must have been Elaina's mother or something...or don't tell me, it couldn't have been her daughter, right? Of course not! No way! So that means it was her mother. Elaina's mother visited this country and was the first person to carve a message into this wall. Incredible! Amazing! It must be my fate to encounter Elaina's mother in a place like this. Hooray! Now there's nothing to do but get married, my sweet angel, Elaina! Amazing! It's a pleasure to meet you, Mother, I'm Saya, your daughter has been very kind to me, by the way, you're so amazing and beautiful, just like Elaina, but of course, Elaina is even more amazing and beautiful, but Elaina is, Elai, Elaina, Elaina, Elaina, Elaina, Elaina, Elaina, Elaina, Elaina, Elaina, Elainaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!

"...Eh, heh-heh."

"Madam Witch, are you all right? You've got a very manic look in your eyes."

"Oh, I'm all right. I just went into a bit of a trance."

"Ah, um...I see..."

I nearly lost it there.

But I was fine.

Actually, I was in perfect form.

My head had just started to spin with tremendous speed as I imagined the face of Elaina's mother.

At that very moment, a solution to the country's wall problem flashed into my mind.

"Mister, lend me that knife, please."

"No good could possibly come of handing you a knife..."

"Come on, come on, it'll be fine."

"Hmm..."

With a reluctant look, the government official handed me his blade.

I quickly used it to carve some words into the wall.

"All right, ready? You do it like this. This is the best way."

As I spoke, I carved the words *I love Elaina, Elaina, Elaina, Elaina, Elaina, Elaina, Ela*—

I didn't get to finish, because the official ran over and grabbed me.

"What the hell are you doing?! This wall is a precious historical monument! It's not some restroom wall waiting for your obscene graffiti!" He seemed rather angry.

I remained cheerful and deflected his anger. "What are you saying? This is super important stuff!"

"What's important about it?! This wall is where we have visitors write all the wonderful things about this country!"

"Yes, that has been the rule, but how about changing it, starting today?"

"...What are you saying?"

He didn't seem to understand what I was getting at.

I explained it as simply as I could.

"Starting today, you will allow anyone in the country to write whatever they please on the wall. Passionate thoughts about the person they love or hopes for the future, for example... Make it a place for people to write what's in their heart, just as I have."

"Why? Surely you have a reason for why we should do such a thing."

I had thought I was dumbing it down enough, but he still didn't seem to understand. Either that—or he was still angry, and it was making him stupid.

What a stubborn fool.

Let's see if I can placate him with an idiot-proof explanation.

"Look, the people who live here built this wall, right? So the wall should be something that they can enjoy."

It's not a travelers' wall.

I told him they should make it a wall that the people want to look at.

○

A lone witch visited that country.

She had ash-gray hair and lapis-colored eyes. She wore a black robe and a pointy black hat, as well as a star-shaped brooch that she displayed proudly upon her breast. She was a witch and a traveler.

She looked to be in her late teens.

By the way, the girl was quite beautiful. People often said she was pretty, and amazing, and a sweet angel.

Who was she?

That's right. She's me.

"....."

In *The Adventures of Niche*, one of the books that had the most influence on me, the protagonist visits a certain country and carves a message on a wall. There are many places around the world that are thought to be that country. For fans of the book, it's something of a holy grail.

This was the place. The author really did visit this country and really did write on the wall. It was a place of pilgrimage, a place that anyone who called themselves a fan would visit at least once to see the writing with their own eyes and make their entreaties.

Now it was my turn to visit.

I had come with very high expectations, but—

"...It's a bust."

It was completely busted down.

There was no trace of a wall, nothing at all. It was just an ordinary country.

My head tilted in confusion. *What's going on? Don't tell me I came to the wrong place.*

But there was no doubt this was the place the author had visited.

This side of the country is really splendid. —a wandering witch

This side of the country is really splendid. —a wandering witch

Two identical inscriptions were standing there like a commemorative plaque. The timeworn letters were surrounded by gold frames and placed in the center of the country, where the wall must have once stood.

“Welcome! Wall for cheap!”

“Get a souvenir of your trip!”

“These are no ordinary ruins; it’s wreckage from the wall.”

“These are rare, rare, rare!”

In the central plaza, where the wall had been demolished, the citizens were walking around selling pieces of the former edifice that they had broken off into sizes small enough to hold in your hand.

They seemed more popular than I’d expected, as travelers were swarming around the many vendors.

Well, it’s just ordinary rubble, right? Though I suppose it has some value, since it was part of the wall...

I had no interest in rubble, so I hurried away from that place.

It looked like the country was no longer divided into east and west, each with its own social leaders. Now everyone gathered together.

As I was taking a short walk around town, I came upon a building under construction.

NEW TOWN HALL UNDER CONSTRUCTION.

Apparently, that’s what it was.

That’s what it says on the sign, so that’s what it must be.

“Hmm...it’s not right. The door is too far to the west.”

“What’re you saying? It’s the windows that are too far east. Gotta be.”

“What the heck are you talking about?”

“.....”

Two old men dressed like government officials were staring at the building under construction, engaged in a modest dispute.

“Excuse me, are you two in charge around here?”

The two of them had an air about them like they might be the best people to tell me the whole story of the wall’s demolition, so I stood before them and asked obsequiously, in a very sweet voice. If you do that, men will tell you almost anything you want to know. Especially older men.

“Oh? I suppose you’re a traveling witch?”

“My, my, how nostalgic. It’s been ten years.”

“Oh? You know about me?”

“Didn’t you come here once a long time ago?”

“...? Mm, but you haven’t gotten any older.”

“Haven’t changed a bit.”

“Hmm? If you look closely, she looks even younger than she did the last time.”

“Sure does.”

“And if you really look close, her chest is different.”

“Sure is.”

“I think she’s a different person.”

“Too bad.”

“.....”

I could feel their vulgar stares.

I quietly put a lid on the anger bubbling up in my chest and asked, “So are you two country officials? Or are you just ordinary wrinkled old geezers?”

“We most certainly are country officials.”

“Though I suppose we’re also wrinkled old geezers.”

“In that case, that’s perfect. Actually, there’s something I’d like to ask you.”

I proceeded to tell them about what I had seen in town and about my reasons for visiting.

“Mm-hmm. I see. I’d say those are some proper questions.”

“The truth is, not a lot of people visit this country

anymore. Maybe it's an important spot from that book or whatever, but that just means that anyone who does visit must be awfully disappointed."

"Why did you demolish the wall?" I asked.

The two of them told me.

According to their account, more than a decade ago at the suggestion of a traveling witch, they had started asking travelers to carve their thoughts about the country into the wall. In recent times, however, the people who lived there had begun writing their own thoughts and feelings.

The names of whom they liked. Their hopes for the future. Stupid wishes. Things that they could never say aloud. A joke about the king's ears. Mere wild ideas.

The people of the country wrote all that and more, without restraint. Whittling away at the wall, they did just as they pleased.

Over the years, many travelers had carved messages into the wall, but suddenly, the wall that towered over the country began running out of space. It turns out the people who lived here had a lot to say.

That was only the beginning of the country's problems. The residents quickly grew tired of reading the same words day after day, week after week. Their own transient thoughts, permanently preserved in stone. Eventually, they were unable to bear the sight of the wall.

"Oh man, this is embarrassing." "You've got to be kidding —who wrote bad stuff about me?!" "We broke up the day after we wrote about sharing an umbrella! I don't want to see it anymore!" "Ugh...I wrote something unbelievable while I was drunk..."

Et cetera, et cetera. Complaints from residents came in one after another.

It wasn't much of a surprise. Unlike the travelers passing through, these people lived in the shadow of the wall. They had to look at it every day of their lives.

A man away from home need feel no shame, but...

The wall became a testament to embarrassing memories. In the end, the number of complaints continued swelling daily, until eventually, the wall had to come down.

Without realizing it, the locals had let go of any resentment they held for their neighbors on the opposite side of the wall. Because they had looked up at the towering edifice and seen themselves and been embarrassed by what they had seen, they could no longer convince themselves that they were so much better than the people on the other side, as they had in the past.

We aren't excellent at all.

Look at how foolish we are.

We have to apologize.

For the first time in a long, long time, the people of that country crossed the wall and talked to each other. They had been surprised to find that everyone from both sides was thinking the same thing, and everything proceeded smoothly, from initial discussions through to the decision to dismantle the barrier.

"In the end, this country didn't need a wall. From the very beginning, we were all the same from top to bottom."

"Well, I suppose we'll start to live ordinary lives as a single, ordinary country from now on."

That was all they had to say on the matter.

And so...

...they had destroyed the one thing bringing in tourists.

"Well, hello there, you adorable witch! How about a souvenir?"

"Let me think. All right, I'll take one to remember it by."

"Thank you!"

I returned to the plaza in the center of the country, and after purchasing a palm-size piece of the wall, I turned toward the gate and started walking.

The bit of rubble I had just bought had the letters *Elai*

carved into it.

*...There's no way someone wrote my name on it, right?
There's just no way...*

“.....”

Awash with a feeling I couldn't quite place, I stuck the piece of rubble into my bag.

In the end, I hadn't been able to see what I had wanted to see. For now, the place was barely surviving as a tourist attraction by selling wall fragments, but when those ran out, the country would become an ordinary place with nothing worth remembering.

It would continue to exist on the margins of the world, just another completely ordinary locale, not considering itself to be anything amazing.

Well, that's probably for the best, as far as the country is concerned.

A country isn't something that exists for travelers and sightseers. There's no need to change it just to bring in tourists or convince them that it's a great place to visit. Rather than trying to cater to outsiders, people should probably work on making their cities a better place for themselves to live.

A country belongs to the people who live there, after all.



CHAPTER 13

The Serial Slasher

Around the time when I visited the country in question, on any sidewalk, in any shop, anytime two or more people met, they would gossip about the Serial Slasher, as casually as if they were discussing the weather.

“Have you ever seen that Serial Slasher?”

“I haven’t, but I know that they’ve already claimed the lives of five women.”

“Yeah, I saw him. I saw him clearly, with my own two eyes. It was the night of a full moon. A terrifying-looking man—”

“No, the culprit is a woman. I’ve seen her.”

“What did you say? I saw them, too. But the Serial Slasher isn’t a man or a woman—they’re both!”

“My, my, the culprit isn’t a doll?”

“It’s terrifying! Oh, it’s so scary! Someone in this town attacked five women, right? It’s not safe to walk outside anymore! I’m going to lock myself up inside my house!”

This was the scene.

The town was in an uproar, and all the residents walking down the road, which was painted to look like red bricks, were shuddering in fear. Keeping an ear out as I walked down the bright red avenue, I heard that a girl had been attacked as recently as this morning. The townspeople seemed consumed by fear.

On the other hand, the outsiders appeared quite calm.

“Wow, that seems rough.”

Who’s that witch, munching on a piece of bread as she strolls along without a care in the world?

That’s right. She’s me.

All that scary stuff was somebody else’s problem. And

apparently, that someone was a witch sent from the United Magic Association to investigate the serious case of the Serial Slasher.

She was an adult woman with long, flowing golden hair that shone softly like stardust. She wore a white robe and a pointy black hat, as well as two brooches, one shaped like a star and the other like a moon.

“...Well, damn. Looks like every one of these folks has their own wishy-washy version of the story.”

As you can imagine, her investigation was not going well.

Maybe because she was very irritated, she was holding a pipe in her hand, blowing out white smoke. The pipe was the eastern style, long and thin, and it trailed from her mouth along with an unpleasant smell.

The city didn’t strike me as the kind of dangerous place where a street slasher might appear. *I should probably spend only one night before heading out. Also, what’s with the horrible stench around here? Oh yeah, this visit will be a short one.*

“...Hmm? Hey, you. Got a second?”

Just as I started walking hastily away, someone tapped me on the shoulder from behind, and the awful stench of pipeweek coiled around me.

Ugh, I hate this smell. I can’t help but make a nasty face.

Revolted, I turned around, waving the white smoke away with my hand, and the witch from the United Magic Association was looking at me.

“You live here?”

“I’m a traveler.”

“Hmm... You know anything about the incidents that have been occurring lately?”

“About the Serial Slasher, you mean? I know a bit. At least, I know everything that I just overheard everyone else telling you. Unfortunately, that’s about all I know.”





When I answered her this way, the witch gave me a bored look.

“...That’s too bad. Well, if you do come across any intel, let me know. I’ve been summoned to provide information about the Serial Slasher at the assembly hall. I’m counting on you.”

“I don’t think I’ll come up with anything, but oh well.”

“...Why are you pinching your nose?”

“Don’t worry about it.” I snorted.

The witch gave me a dubious look, then took a small slip of paper from her breast pocket. “I’m Sheila. I belong to the United Magic Association.”

On the slip of paper she abruptly presented me were the words she had just said a moment earlier, along with the moniker *Midnight Witch*.

“I am Elaina. The Ashen Witch, Elaina. Though I don’t suppose we’re ever going to meet again.”

Figuring I may as well, I accepted the card.



I couldn’t help feeling like it was a little suicidal to hang around a city that was supposed to be plagued by a Serial Slasher, so after that, I decided to search for an inn and take a room right away.

Because every house and road in this town was painted like red brick, it was a pain to hunt for an inn. On top of that, I couldn’t go anywhere without attracting a lot of unwanted attention—presumably it was because I was dressed like a witch, and that *Midnight Witch*, Sheila, had made a poor impression on the city folk while sniffing around for information about the slasher.

“.....”

Just being a witch was constricting. I found it bothersome, so I took off my brooch and went around town

as an ordinary mage.

No matter where I walked, the scenery was almost exactly the same. There was something impressive about the uniformity, but I was on a mission and quickly grew tired of it.

I continued walking, and in the middle of town, I saw all kinds of stores. There was a bookshop, a café, and stores selling dolls. Dolls were apparently a local specialty, so there were many doll shops lined up.

Oh-ho, well, if it's the local specialty, maybe I'll buy one as a souvenir, I thought as I stepped into one of the stores.

"Heh-heh-heh...welcome. The dolls in my store are amazing, and that's not all! Long ago, I had them imported from another country, so they're rare. They're *vintage*. See, look at this one, this little one is especially amazing... See, the quality of the hair is very realistic, and it's incredibly high quality, right? It smells nice, too. Want a sniff?"

"Um, sorry, I seem to have entered the wrong shop."

I left immediately.

The sketchy atmosphere was a little too much for me.

It didn't take me long after that to find an inn. The building was done up in red brick no better than the others, and I walked straight through the door, paid for one night's stay, and shut myself in my room.

I also might've been a little worried about the Serial Slasher, so I made sure to lock the door and closed the window as well.

"...There's one here, too."

Of course. It was the local specialty. A doll was seated on the bedside table. It was clad in an extravagant dress, fashioned after a black-haired little girl. Its mouth was smiling subtly, and its eyes stared out at the timeworn room. It was kind of eerie.

"....."

I couldn't relax with the thing just sitting there, so I picked up the doll and tossed it into the closet.

"Well, today I think I'll go straight to bed."

After that, I took a bath, gorged myself on bread for dinner, lay in bed staring at a book, and killed time until late at night.

"....."

When you've got nothing to do, drowsiness strikes quickly.

Before I knew it, I had fallen into a deep sleep.

It was morning.

"...So I fell asleep, huh?"

My book was resting limply on top of me. I placed it on the nightstand and sat up.

The weather outside my window was clear, and a soft light illuminated the red-tinted cityscape, while a gentle breeze fluttered my curtain and flowed around my body.

I closed my eyes for a moment to enjoy the pleasant breeze.

"...Hmm?"

What's this?

Huh? Did I open the window?

...Hmm-hmmmm?

Did I do that?

Unfortunately, my memory before falling asleep the previous night was pretty hazy. I wasn't even certain exactly when I had drifted off. I also didn't remember how far I had read in my book.

Being who I am, I might have opened the window without even realizing it.

How careless.

"Oh well."

The fact I was still alive meant that, at the very least, I hadn't fallen prey to the Serial Slasher.

The truth is, even though I am a witch, I wouldn't stand a chance if someone attacked me in my sleep. I was

somewhat reassured that nothing had happened, even though I had left the window open.

However—

“...Something feels kind of strange.”

My body felt oddly light or like there wasn’t enough of something. I felt some slight sense of loss.

I don’t know what it could be, though.

.....

“Oh well.”

Ultimately, I let the uncomfortable feeling pass and, with drowsy eyes, pulled my toothbrush out of my bag and headed for the bathroom.

Well then, what shall I do today? I thought as I went.

“.....”

However...

When I spotted my reflection in the mirror, still half asleep, I immediately jolted awake.

Something unbelievable greeted me.

The source of my elusive discomfort.

“Eh—what...is this?”

I dropped my toothbrush in the sink and touched my hair with trembling fingers.

My hair, which should have been smooth, glossy, ash-colored, and waist-length, had been hacked off.

It was a mere shadow of its former self.

My hair was gone.

While I was sleeping, my long hair had been cut short.

“...Who did this?”

Then I suddenly remembered.

The rumors going around town yesterday.

The Serial Slasher.

It took the lives of five women.

Women’s lives.

“.....”

By the way, don’t people say that a woman’s hair is her life?

○

"As you may have already deduced, there's no doubt this was the work of the very same Serial Slasher. One girl was suddenly slashed on the way back from a shopping trip. Another was attacked while hanging out in a café. In your case, it seems you were hit in your sleep."

Let's talk about what happened after I had my hair mangled.

First, I headed for the hotel's front desk on shaky legs, still wearing my pajamas. After I explained the situation to the lady at the desk, I handed over the card given to me by the Midnight Witch, Sheila, and asked the woman at the desk to bring her here. The shock of the disappearance of my precious hair was too much, and I didn't feel like going outside. The attendant looked hesitant, so I had to throw down some gold coins.

After that, I lay facedown on the bed and sulked, waiting for Sheila to arrive.

Sheila, who had come running, laughed at me through her nose. "To think that someone who calls herself a witch would fall victim to a little Serial Slasher...hah!"

"....." I didn't have the energy to respond, so I just glowered at her from atop the bed.

Sheila shrugged, as if my reproachful glare didn't faze her at all, and said, "Well, for the time being, I'll take a look around the scene of the crime," as she pulled on a pair of gloves.

"What should I do?"

"Just sit there and look pretty."

"....."

If there's nothing I need to do, then I'll do nothing.

From my perch on the bed, I watched what Sheila was doing.

With practiced movements, she turned over all the

furniture in the room. She flipped each and every thing, from the shelves and the table to the closet and even the flower vase. Of course, the bed was no exception. It was literally turned upside down, and I, who at this point had become largely ornamental, was dumped unceremoniously on the floor.

"Hmm...nothing suspicious here."

"I think the most suspicious thing in this whole room is you, Sheila," I said from the floor.

"I'm not suspicious. This is an investigation; I'm investigating." She was looking down at me. "By the way, did you see anything suspicious? Or is there anything about the room that's changed since yesterday?"

"Just about everything is different."

...because it's been turned upside down.

"I can do without your poor attempts at humor."

"That's not going to stop me."

On the other hand, I could really get a good look at the state of the room while lying on the floor, and from my new vantage point, I suddenly realized something.

"...Ah. The doll disappeared."

"Doll?"

I nodded and pointed at the closet.

"Yesterday, I moved a doll that was sitting on my bedside table into the closet, but it's not there anymore."

"Mm-hmm...I see." Nodding sagely to herself, Sheila muttered, "Just as I thought..."

"Just as you thought what?"

"Each incident shares one commonality. All the girls had their hair cut off, but they were never really harmed. Yesterday, I went around to take the victims' statements, and I feel confident in saying that all of the slashing incidents were carried out by the same perpetrator."

"By whom?"

Sheila answered my question decisively.

"The doll."

“.....”

“The criminal probably animated the doll using magic or something and is commanding it to cut girls’ hair. That’s why I spent yesterday searching for clues about the real culprit, but... Well, I didn’t make any progress on that front.”

According to the people of the town, the culprit was a terrifying man...or woman...or both. Uncovering the truth in a city so awash in rampant speculation had to be particularly difficult.

“Well then, in that case, what do you know now?”

“I listened to the victims. I think I said that already, but thanks to their testimony, at this point, I’ve figured out where the dolls are coming from.”

“Uh-huh.”

I see, I see.

“In that case, let’s go bust up the source of the dolls. I’ll make them repent in hell for cutting off my hair.” I leaped to my feet. I was suddenly raring to go, overflowing with excitement and bloodlust.

“Hey, wait, calm down a little. Listen to the end when someone’s talking.”

“What is it? Did you decapitate the criminal already?”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself...” Sheila let out a heavy sigh. “That’s not it. I’ve figured out where the dolls are coming from, but it’s a bit of an annoying situation.”

“Trouble?”

I had changed out of my pajamas and into my usual robe, and after glancing at my chest, Sheila said, “In this country, rare dolls seem to be bought and sold through backroom auctions. Of course, that only goes for the items with rather...shady histories, not the legitimate products. So both the buyers and the sellers go by aliases.”

Why is she looking at my chest while she talks?

“.....”

But I more or less understood what Sheila was trying to

say. To escape her gaze, I quickly finished dressing and then asked, "Do you mean to say that the dolls the victims owned were all purchased there?"

Sheila nodded. She was staring at my chest again. "By the way, the old woman who runs the shop seems to be quite the collector. I threatened her earlier and forced her to spit out some info, and sure enough, the MO was the same at all the other crime scenes."

Sheila began fishing around in her bag. "Ah, here it is," she said, and whipped out a doll. It closely resembled the one that had been sitting on my bedside table the day before, a little blond doll.

"I threatened the lady running the store again, and this is the doll I seized. Apparently, it was produced by the same doll maker as the ones owned by the victims."

"It looks fairly ordinary, though it's got a creepy air about it, like it might start moving any moment."

With a proud look, Sheila grabbed the doll by the nape of the neck and swung it back and forth. "It looks ordinary, huh? Look closely. This seems to have been made by a pretty twisted prick."

"...Hmm?"

As instructed, I brought my face closer to the doll's. As it swayed around, its eyes focused on me, and it adopted a creepy smile.

The doll and I stared at each other like that for a little while.

"Ah!" I realized, "It's the hair?"

Sheila nodded. "Exactly. This doll has human hair on its head. That's why it feels so luxurious."

"....."

"It's likely it was made using hair from the victims of the Serial Slasher."

"I see."

Well, they certainly are twisted.

"Well, that's the situation. That's why they're being

traded at backroom auctions or whatever." Still rocking the doll back and forth, Sheila continued, "By the way, it sounds like they're holding one of those auctions today."

"Oh?"

"Do you wanna go?"

Instead of answering, I put on my robe, pulled my pointy black hat down tight, and gathered my things.

It was one of my habits to flip my hair out with a fluttering gesture after fastening my robe, but my freshly sheared locks had already escaped my collar.

.....

I'll never forgive that doll maker.

"Well then, let's go, shall we?"

Sheila nodded, and I left the room with her.

"By the way, why were you looking only at my chest earlier?"

"Hmm? Um...well, I was thinking it was kind of small."

"....."

"....."

"Also, if we're going to a backroom auction house, take off your robe and hat. If you stand out, there's a chance you'll blow our cover."

"....."

I'll never forgive the Midnight Witch.



Apparently, we could get into the backroom auction house through the back section of a shop that was on the distant end of a back alley across town. It was all "back" behind the scenes.

There were three conditions to get into the secret auction.

The first was to keep your identity a secret.

That is, as long as you were in the auction house, you

were just a customer, no more and no less.

Accordingly, I wore just my shirt and skirt, adopting a truly plain look, and Sheila wore a dress for some reason. Because our cover would be blown if we looked conspicuous or something like that.

The second condition was to wear a mask.

Apparently, it was necessary to conceal one's identity by donning a mask that covered the eyes. Because these were the back streets.

"...But if we only conceal our eyes, you can easily tell who everyone is."

"Don't say that. For something like this, ambience is important. When you put on a mask, you feel like you're getting away with something wrong, right?"

"No, it's pretty clear we're doing something wrong when we attend a backroom auction."

What are you even saying?

"Well, anyway, let's go in."

Concealing ourselves behind costumes and masks, we stepped into the secret auction house.

By the way, the third condition for admittance was to pay the entry fee.

The backroom auction house was a basement room, but it was clean and well appointed. Actually, it was so extravagant, you would call it ornate.

Chandeliers descended from a ceiling adorned with enigmatic paintings, shedding golden light on the seats lined up below, which were covered in red sheets. It looked less like an auction house and more like a proper opera house.

"Apparently, this place used to be an opera house."

"Oh."

Right, so it was a proper opera house. Long ago, it would have hosted crowds dressed in appropriate splendor

gathering to immerse themselves in that noble art form, but now...

"Heh-heh-heh...today I'm gonna get me one of those dolls...heh-heh..."

"I'll definitely get it, definitely get it, definitely get it!"

"I've been saving all my money just for today... I won't go home until I win."

"....."

How should I put this? With their bloodshot eyes, the seedy crowd was totally unsuited to the opulent decor.

As I drank in my bizarre surroundings, we took our seats. Next to me, Sheila was fiddling with the numbered placard she had been given and let out a sigh. "Every one of them is desperate."

"I wonder why they get so worked up over some stupid dolls."

"I don't really know, but maybe there's some appeal to the kind of illicit merchandise you can't just buy in public."

"Huh..."

I don't really understand their obsession.

We were kept waiting for several more minutes in the loud, crowded room. Finally, a lone man appeared onstage.

"All right, everyone, thank you for your patience! Today, as always, we have some incredible products, courtesy of our talented artisans! Everyone, do you want them? I said, do you want them? Of course you do!"

The whole hall burst into a frenzy at the man's shameless instigation. The crowd must have been just on the verge of boiling over.

Anyway, no one would have gone out of their way to come to the auction if they didn't want the dolls, would they? Of course not.

The man onstage spent a little time giving some warnings and explained the simple rules that would be used during the auction:

Raise your numbered placard, say a price, and the

person who offers the highest price makes the winning bid. Don't bid what you can't pay. Don't wring your own neck by going way over your budget.

Et cetera, et cetera...

This was really all pretty obvious.

"Well then, let's hurry up and get started! Here is our first item!"

Then, the long-awaited doll made its appearance on the stage.

It was a girl doll.

Life-size.

"Ah, so that's what they mean by irregular merchandise."

"I see."

She appeared to be very popular, as any number of placards went up around the hall. The competition was extremely intense, but at the conclusion of a fierce fight, a rich-looking older man was victorious, offering a frankly staggering sum.

"Are all dolls like that one?"

"No, I don't think they are. If the information I got is true, then I'm certain the dolls we're looking for can be purchased here."

As far as I could see, though, the second doll being brought to the stage was also a life-size girl, as was the third.

What exactly is the deal with this auction?

"....."

I was gradually getting irritated with the chatter around me, but what happened after that got me interested in the merchandise onstage.

"All right, everyone, thank you for waiting! This here! This next one! Is the showcase item!"

It was a totally normal-size doll, which, if you looked closely, was comparable to the one in the room where I'd stayed.

If you looked really closely, it was clad in the same kind of

gaudy dress as the one in the room where I'd stayed.

To sum it up—

"Is that it?"

"Sure is." I nodded. "...But what the heck have they done with it? Are they looking for a fight?"

"Keep it together."

"....."

These dolls certainly were quite twisted.

"Look at her! In pursuit of realism, the locks on this doll are made using actual human hair!" the man onstage shouted somewhat excitedly. "But it's gray hair! Quite a rare color, it's beautiful hair with a fine luster!"

Well then, who on earth do you think is the owner of that rare hair?

...Me, probably. No, I'm almost certain.

The audience went into an uproar over the new item. Frenzied voices erupted here and there, to the point that the screams and the shouts of joy were indistinguishable.

What on earth is going on here? That's my hair!

"They're really eating it up. I sentence them all to death."

"Come on, calm down," Sheila reassured me confidently. "Those customers don't know how it was made. They're not responsible."

And yet—

"What's more, this doll is the handiwork of the Serial Slasher who's the talk of the town! How about it? Amazing, isn't it?!" The man onstage was getting the bidders fired up again.

Sheila shrugged her shoulders carelessly. "Well, damn, you can forget what I just said."

This seemed like it might become troublesome.

"By the way, Sheila. I understand that the doll was made by the Serial Slasher, so what might you be planning to do about that?"

"That should be obvious. I'm going to win the auction and locate the culprit."

“Oh.”

While I was nodding along, the auction began.

The man onstage banged his wooden mallet. “Now then, let’s start the bidding at one gold piece.”

Numbered placards went up all over the hall, and voices filled the air.

Two gold pieces, three pieces, five, seven, nine, ten, twelve, fourteen, fifteen!

The amount of money being offered for the doll made with my stolen hair reached ridiculous heights. Inflation ran wild. The price skyrocketed.

“It seems very difficult to win, doesn’t it?”

“...Looks that way.”

The number of gold coins soon passed twenty, and as it was approaching thirty, my stress levels were also nearing their limits.

Something snapped inside me. Because of my missing hair.

Then, I stood up.

“Sheila. I’ve got an idea that will be much faster than winning an auction.”



“Twenty-nine gold pieces! Any further bids? None? Well then, *sold* for twenty-nine—”

No, no.

I won’t let you get away with that.

“Yahh!” Before the auctioneer could bring his mallet down, I fired a stream of light from my wand and blasted the wooden hammer away. It flew from the man’s hand, spinning around and around in the air, until it landed on the stage.

“Huh? Just what is—waaaaaaahhh!”

While I was at it, I also blasted the auctioneer.

He was in the way, you see.

My footsteps echoed dramatically through the hall, which was now in an uproar at this unexpected development. As I approached the stage, I was aware that everyone's attention was focused on me.

"What on earth just happened?"

"Hey, look at that hair. It's the same color as the doll's."

"Could she be...you know?"

"This is bad, huh...?"

They whispered.

"Everyone, do you know who put these dolls up for sale? Do you know where they acquired the dolls' hair?" As I was walking toward the stage, I spoke solemnly to no one in particular. "No, I'm sure you all know. Those dolls were made by the Serial Slasher, and that hair is the property of the victims."

And some of it is mine.

"Got it? I suppose you all thought that since you're only buying the dolls, you don't share in any of the responsibility. The moment you make your purchase, though, you're equally guilty. No, you're guilty the moment you set foot in this place. You all deserve death."

I stepped onstage with a clack.

"I think it's likely the culprit is among us. Since the criminal went to great pains to make such amazing dolls and is proud enough of their work to enter them in an auction, I'm certain they get some sick satisfaction out of seeing how high a price their dolls can fetch."

With that, I grabbed the doll by the neck and held it up in the air.

"However, there are a lot of people here. Why, there must be at least a hundred of you. Searching for the culprit would be super tedious, so I tried to come up with a better idea. I needed a plan.

"However, though I thought long and hard, I failed to come up with a concrete solution. No, that's not quite

accurate. To tell you the truth, I gave up trying to work it out halfway through.

“Sure, it may be just one person making the dolls, but everyone in this room is equally culpable. The doll maker brazenly selling dolls made with people’s stolen hair is guilty, but you are all just as guilty for trying to buy them, despite knowing their twisted origin.”

And so...

“That’s why I’m very angry. I want to quell my rage, so I’ve decided to do something to choke the life out of every person here. For example, something like this.”

Crunch.

I snapped the doll’s neck.

“And this.”

Rrrrip.

I tore all the doll’s hair clean out.

“And also...this!”

Crash.

I dismembered the doll and dropped it.

“Well then, who’s first on the chopping block? Who would be good? Any volunteers? Oh-ho-ho!”

My voice echoed through the room, making me aware that the hall, which was larger than I’d thought, had fallen completely silent. I waited a little while and a little while longer, but nobody spoke a single word.

I suppose you’re thinking I’ll give you a pass if you keep quiet. Don’t underestimate me.

“Hyah!”

I trampled the dismembered doll underfoot, grinding it slowly beneath my heel.

“So the criminal is silent, huh? Too bad. In that case, I think I’ll deal with you one by one, starting from the right, just like this—”

“What a terrible thing you’ve done!”

From somewhere in the hall came a voice. It was a woman.

"That's my doll, you know! Did you know that? It's a vintage item. It's not something that you can treat roughly like that!"

The woman was extremely angry. With long strides, she forced her way to the front of the hall and climbed the stage.

"Huh? Have we met somewhere before?"

Her face looked familiar.

"Yesterday, you came into my shop, and ever since then, I've been thinking about your hair and nothing else."

"....."

I remembered.

This was the owner of the shady doll shop.

"Your hair is incredibly beautiful and rare. It's so incredible that, against my better judgment, I came to covet it. Are you angry?"

"....."

I pointedly ground the doll farther into the floor.

"Goodness! You look amazing even when you're angry!"

The old woman squirmed like a maiden in love.

"Tell me, why are you transplanting people's hair onto dolls?"

"Isn't it obvious? It's because I want to spread beauty to a wider audience! When I graft people's hair onto dolls, you see, the dolls really come alive. At first, I was using my own hair, but you see, even that was insufficient. Before I knew it, I had started using other people's hair. I control my dolls from far away and use them to cut girls' locks. The looks on their faces when they find out they've lost their long hair, pictures of despair and anger...they're also heavenly! I found the whole thing so rewarding that I couldn't stand it! Oh, it really is so incredible!"

"Uh, sure."

I pulled back.

I pulled way back.

How unfortunate that my hair had been sliced to satisfy

such perversion.

"Well then, what will you do, miss? Will you give in to your rage and try to challenge me? You should know that I'm a witch! Understand? It's the highest rank among magic users. You have no chance of beating me. I wonder, will you surrender to your anger and try to fight me anyway?"

"....."

Um, I'm a witch, too. She's probably confusing me for an ordinary mage because I wasn't wearing my brooch when I visited her shop.

"Well, well, well, well. What will you do? Show me more of that beautiful angry face!"

She had gone and gotten herself all worked up.

After abandoning even the slightest sign of sympathy toward her, I only had one thing to say.

"This is the end of the line for you."

The moment I finished speaking, a cage exactly the right size for a person fell from above, imprisoning the woman, while handcuffs with chains running around the fingers clamped around her hands, preventing her from gripping her wand.

It all happened in an instant. The woman who had been frolicking onstage had become a caged criminal.

"Yo, thanks for your help, Elaina."

Sheila's voice rang out from somewhere in the hall, accompanied by curls of white smoke, which disappeared after an announcement reminding everyone that, "*Smoking is prohibited inside the building.*"

The cage was a spell, cast by Sheila.

"...Huh?" The astonished woman, her eyes wide, beat at the magical bars with her open palms. "What are you doing? What is this? You must be angry, right? Are you happy just letting it end like this? Get angrier!"

"....."

I had absolutely no idea what she was carrying on about.

I mean, I didn't understand the urge to make dolls with human hair, but this obsession with wanting to see girls get mad somehow made even less sense.

It's got to be something gross, right?

Honestly, I don't understand this kind of person.

I did my best to smile and told her one thing.

"I'm angrier than I've ever been, and that's precisely why I'm going to do something you're sure to hate even more."



Allow me to keep the rest of the story short and simple.

The affair concluded without further incident.

I recovered my hair and quickly repaired it with a spell, returning it to its usual smooth, glossy, lengthy luster.

Welcome home, my luscious locks.

So we caught the criminal. Apparently, she had controlled the dolls remotely with magic. She ought to have been able to control the doll onstage, too, but after I had torn it to shreds, it seemed she had no alternative but to appear in person.

Under Sheila's supervision, the prisoner was sent out of the country to a branch office of the United Magic Association.

They seem like they would have appropriate punishments there.

"My recommendation is the death penalty."

Sheila, who was in the middle of escorting the criminal, scowled at my words. "Sorry to say, but this lady only cut people's hair off. I don't think her punishment is going to be that severe. At the very least, they're not going to sentence her to death."

"That's not good enough. One death penalty, please."

"Don't say stupid things, Stupid."

"She must atone for her crimes against my hair.

Therefore, the death penalty is most appropriate.”

“But your hair’s already back to normal, isn’t it?”

“Then I guess I’ll just have to cut it off again.”

“Why would you do such a thing...?”

Well, how about my righteous anger at a deplorable criminal?

Even as Sheila and I were finishing our exchange, the culprit in question was drooling and laughing to herself, “Heh-heh-heh...” and “How nice...” and so on.

This lunatic isn’t the least bit remorseful, is she?

I would have preferred to beat her to a pulp with my own two hands, but given it seemed like she might enjoy that even more, I was at a loss.

Hmmm...

“You’re making kind of a difficult face there.” Sheila shrugged. “Well, relax already. There’s probably an even harsher punishment than the death penalty waiting where I’m taking her.”

“What do you mean?”

“Who knows?”

Dodging the question with an ambiguous smile, Sheila used her magic to lift the cage and climbed onto her broom.

“All right, then. I’m going. I’m in a hurry.”

“Is that so?”

“Let’s meet again, Ashen Witch.”

She was a United Magic Association witch. I was a traveling witch.

I really don’t think I’m going to see her again, but oh well.

“Let’s meet again, Midnight Witch.”

I did my best to smile.



The rest of the story went as follows:

The Midnight Witch, Sheila, took her time flying over the prairie with a huge cage suspended from the handle of her broom. She proceeded toward the nearest country with a United Magic Association branch.

The United Magic Association has offices all over the world. The day after the matter of the Serial Slasher was resolved, Sheila entered a branch precinct, presented her report on the incident and the perpetrator, and was paid a considerable sum.

This is how troubleshooting traveling witches make their living.

"Ah! I wondered who that was. If it isn't my teacher!"

By the way, there are many, many witches and mages who wander the world solving people's problems. Sheila's pupil was one of them.

"Oh, it's you. What're you doing here?"

"I just arrived. I got into a bit of money trouble, so I thought I'd come get a job." Sheila's pupil's black hair swung gently as she marveled at the huge cage at Sheila's side. "...You could let me have that job?"

"Are you stupid? I just finished it."

"That's why I want to take it!"

"....."

Sheila let out an exasperated sigh.

"What did this person do? Her eyes are twinkling strangely."

The woman inside the cage was excited to make her debut in a new scene. "Ah...how cute!" she said. "Your angry face is even more adorable, no doubt about it!" Happily, her words never reached the pupil's ears.

"Oh, her? Ah, umm..." Sheila hesitated a little over whether she should say. "The truth is, this woman is the Serial Slasher who was going around cutting people's hair."

"Wow."

"Her methods were quite fiendish, and she was cunning enough to cut the hair of a traveling witch. I captured her

like this, and now I'm going to deliver her into custody at this branch office."

"Huh, she cut a traveling witch's hair?"

"Yeah..." Sheila smiled meaningfully. "It was a witch with beautiful ash-colored hair."

"A traveling witch with beautiful ash-colored hair, you say? Hmm..."

"And she was wearing the same pointy black hat as you."

"The same pointy black hat, you say? Hmm." "

"And the same necklace."

"Heh-heh...is that so? Hmm...I see."

As they were talking, Sheila noticed her pupil's smile gradually taking on an eerie cast.

At the same time, she also heard a hopeful voice leaking out of the cage by her side. "I don't really know what you're going on about, but I know you're angry!"

Still grinning from ear to ear, her pupil said, "Would you be so kind as to tell me the details?"

By the way, the pupil's name was Saya.

Meeting Saya taught the Serial Slasher that there are things in this world that can make even the anger and sadness of girls who've had their hair lopped off seem mild.



CHAPTER 14

A Story About All Kinds of Ashen Witches

Let me tell you a story about Elaina.

Well, no doubt I've been telling my stories this whole time, but now I'll tell you a story about *Elaina*.

I am a witch who wears a black robe and a pointy black hat, and I am a traveler. I'm always wandering aimlessly through this world, meeting strange people, visiting strange countries, and getting caught up in strange happenings.

However, that doesn't mean that I'm always having valuable personal experiences.

If I were to try to write down my experiences in a book, it would probably seem like I was always putting myself at the center of weird stories, but the truth is that's not the case. Most of the time, nothing much happens to me. I do a little sightseeing, wherever I am, and then move on. Those strange chance encounters are actually quite rare. More often than not, I'll be hoping for some excitement, and nothing will happen. When something does happen, it's usually at the least convenient moment.

Travel is a series of meetings and partings and also a series of decisions. When I look back on it, I'm sure I've missed out on some interesting encounters, but I've also made some pretty interesting acquaintances.

It can't be helped if there's the occasional regret, right? That's because when you travel, you have no choice but to keep moving forward.

This day was no exception.

I had been flying on my broom for only a short while when I had a hunch I was about to have an unusual

encounter.

“The City of Granted Wishes, huh? Hmm...”

In the middle of the prairie, I had found a city with those words inscribed on its gate.

Well now, what do we have here?

What an interesting name that is.

What's the deal? If I wish to be really, really rich, will I become really, really rich?

On the gate was also written ALL WISH-SEEKERS WELCOME. I didn't know who was in there, but they seemed to be welcoming me in wholeheartedly.

How on earth are they able to grant wishes? What's the deal with this city?

The rampart featured a low gate, but it wasn't possible to peek inside. I couldn't tell what it looked like in there.

Right now, it's a mystery.

However, I knew one thing for certain: I was interested.

“Pardon me!”

For that reason, I opened the gate into the city.



On the other side of the gate was the city, but I had to wonder what in the world was going on, because I didn't find even a single other person.

Inside, it was absolutely silent, just houses lined up in rows, no sign of other humans, let alone voices. Just the lonely echoes of my own footsteps.

It didn't seem like the city had gone to ruin, as the buildings arrayed on both sides of the road were dressed in antiquated red brickwork, or had white stucco walls, or colorful paint, and looked very inconsistent. It was chaotic, as if scenery from all different kinds of cities had been crowded together in one place.

There were no signs of people, but cords with laundry hanging on them were strung between the buildings, and there were street stalls on the sides of the road. Fruits and other foods were lined up in neat rows, but the shops seemed unmanned. They all had signs with the words PLEASE LEAVE PAYMENTS IN THE BOX written on them.

Still, I didn't see anyone. There wasn't a soul to my right or my left.

All that remained was the feeling that someone had once lived here.

Huh? Isn't someone going to grant my wish? What the heck is this?

I tilted my head in confusion at this inexplicable tableau. Whatever the case, the only thing I knew for certain was that something very strange was going on.

".....Hmm."

When I had walked down the road a short distance, I could see a palace. It looked old and seemed out of place with the rest of the city. Its walls were full of cracks, and the whole thing looked as if it would crumble at the slightest disturbance.

Not far from the palace stood a clock tower, ticking the time away. According to the tower, right now the time was a little past noon.

"....."

What on earth?

Is this déjà vu?

Everything here, I'd seen somewhere before. The city looked as if it were made up of pieces of the various places I'd visited on my travels, all stuck together. The palace was the spitting image of where I'd met the queen who was the only survivor in a ruined country, and the clock tower bore a striking resemblance to the tower in the Clock Village of Rostolf that I had visited just a little while ago.

What in the world is going on here?

It was giving me the sense that this place had been prepared just for me, and that wasn't the strangest part. Many of the buildings were clearly much taller than the city wall, so why hadn't I seen them from the outside?

There was definitely something peculiar going on.

"Hellooooo! Do you live in this city?!"

I was puzzling over this mysterious situation, humming to myself and following the road as it bent to the right, when I suddenly ran into someone. She seemed like a traveler, just like me, and she came toward me waving her hands and shouting in a carefree voice.

"Hmm, no luck, huh? You're not from around here, are you? That's the kind of face you're making."

"....."

There was something very odd about the person standing before me. She wore a black robe and a pointy black hat. In addition, she had on a star-shaped brooch. She seemed to be a witch. Her hair was ash-colored, and her eyes were lapis-colored. She was about the same age as me.

That witch, who on earth was she?

That's right. She's me.

A me who wasn't me... A girl who looked exactly like me was standing before my eyes.

Just like a doppelgänger.

"Well now. Would you happen to be a fan of mine? You're doing a cosplay of me, aren't you! I cannot approve of unauthorized cosplay. I collect royalties on my clothing, you know?"

"....."

By the way, it seemed like the only thing identical was our outward appearance. From her words and actions, I could keenly feel the weakness of her intellect.



“My name is Elaina. The Ashen Witch. I’m a traveler.”

“My name is Elaina. I’m the Ashen Witch and a traveler. Oh, the fee for violating my copyright and cosplaying as me without permission is one hundred gold pieces, if you please.”

I ignored the nonsense at the end there.

“Anyway, why are there two of me...?”

“Hmm? I’m me, and you’re playing dress-up, right? What are you talking about?”

“.....”

I should ask you what you’re talking about. Are you stupid? Is your head empty?

“Sorry, I know this is strange, but would you please list all the places you’ve visited on your travels?”

I decided that, first of all, I needed to determine whether or not the other me standing there was just an imposter. I kept a notebook concealed in the pocket of my robe so I could always quickly recall the places I had visited. I had never shown it to anyone, and it was something I never took out in the presence of others. If she was really me, I figured she would use the notebook as a reference.

But...

“Why do you need me to list them all? I suppose you’re planning to make a pilgrimage to all the places I’ve visited? To worship them as holy ground? I knew it, you’re obsessed with me!”

“...This girl is a real pain.”

She spoke an awful lot and said an awful little. I was desperately hoping this girl wasn’t actually me.

Then, to my dismay, she produced a notebook from her pocket.

I refuse to believe it, but what do we have here? Nothing she says or does makes any sense.

“Okay, first up—”

She then enumerated my travels up until that point, and despite a few slight differences, as far as I could tell by

hearing her summary, she was unmistakably me. I had absolutely no idea what on earth was going on here, and it was enough to make my head ache. Since the city itself was some kind of strange mishmash, though, I decided to stop thinking about the doppelgänger situation for now.

"Well, it must have been fated or something for us to meet here, so shall we look around town together?"

"Oh, you were charmed by my cuteness, were you? No, you must have already been in love with me by the time you started cosplaying! Well, all right, I suppose there's no helping it. I shall grace you with my presence."

After that, I spent about five hundred words whining before eventually saying, "I'll go along with you."

We walked side by side through the town.

Around lunchtime, I was feeling a bit peckish, so I took an apple in my hand. In the same laid-back way, she had a kebab in her hand.

...Wait, why a kebab?

Anyway...

"Um, so what should I call you?"

"Hmm? My name is Elaina?"

"But I'm Elaina."

I was at a loss and frowned, but at almost the exact same time, the girl with the same cavalier look as me puffed her cheeks out.

"Hang on. You just adopted that name after you started dressing like me, right? I'm the real Elaina!"

"....."

From my perspective, you're the imposter, though...

Still, arguing with her wouldn't get me anywhere. Just like how, to a foreigner, you appear foreign, it was plain to see we would never reach the end of the debate, no matter how much we went in circles.

This is getting troublesome, so I'm going to give the

carefree girl the temporary name High-Strung Elaina before proceeding with the story. Because she's excessively high-strung.

“By the way, what did you wish for when you came here? This is the City of Granted Wishes, you know. Did you have a wish?”

“My wish? Well, that’s obvious, isn’t it?!“ After gnawing wildly at her kebab, she said, “Nothing in particular!”

Wow, what an idiot.

“Well, I was hoping to become rich when I came here.”

“Wow, what an idiot.”

“Sorry, but you’re the one person I don’t want to hear that from.”

“What did you say? The real pleasure of traveling is to travel by instinct, without overthinking things! Am I wrong?”

There’s some truth to that, but in your case...isn’t the inside of your head just hollow?

Despite our wishes being completely different, though, we’ve somehow been brought together. Why?

It makes me feel like some sort of unseen designs are in motion.

After we had explored the city a bit, two things became clear.

The first was that this place was indeed made of parts and pieces of all the places I had visited on my journey. Every building, every street stall, I had seen somewhere before.

And there was one more thing.

Not a single thing existed aside from that.

There was absolutely nothing I didn’t recognize. No matter how long I scrutinized my surroundings, I couldn’t find a single unfamiliar fixture. The whole city was the very embodiment of *déjà vu*.

"...I'm getting kind of bored," High-Strung Elaina said as she finished eating her seventh kebab of the day.

You're eating too much...

"Well, that's because there's absolutely nothing new here to see," I answered.

She had already spent several weeks going around and around the city. Nevertheless, she didn't understand the first thing about it and, consequently, was a nuisance.

Admittedly, it was rather novel to see a city made up of all the things I had seen before, but if that's all there was to it, well, I could have imagined that in my own head. Even if the whole place did have a mysterious appeal, after several weeks, it probably grew stale.

"...Mm. I've had enough!"

"I'll say. Just how many kebabs did you put away...?"

"Well. That's true, too, but I meant I've had enough of this town. It looks like a reproduction of the places I've already been. That's all there is to see. As you can imagine, I've had my fill of it."

"...Same here."

It seemed the version of me that was standing next to me was a very high-strung individual, just like me. We were thinking the same thing.

However—

This city seemed like something someone had created after peeking into my head. At the exact moment our boredom was reaching critical mass, the story took a new twist.

Suddenly, before our very eyes, a lone girl appeared.

She had two twisted horns on her head and wings just like a bat's were growing from her back. Unfortunately, this person was nothing new, either. She was simply another version of me but with wings and horns and...

"What a demanding bunch you are. And after I went to all the trouble of creating this city just to amuse you."

The voice that slithered from her mouth was nothing like

my own. She looked quite a bit older than me and had a calm demeanor.

She may have been my spitting image, but there was no doubt in my mind that she was an entirely different person.

"Are you from around here?"

She nodded. "Indeed. This City of Granted Wishes is a place I created for travelers, just like you two."

"Oh-ho! In that case, let's cut to the chase. What on earth is the deal here? It's only got stuff I've already seen before." High-Strung Me took up her eighth kebab.

"Why, it's the City of Granted Wishes. In order to grant your wishes, the city needs to look inside your heads, right? Of course it's all stuff you've seen before."

I see.

"I didn't come here to take a trip down memory lane. I came to get rich."

"I'm sure you believed that to be the reason. However, your true desires are something no one knows. Perhaps, deep in your heart of hearts, you were thinking that you'd like to visit these places once again."

"....."

"I see!" High-Strung Elaina was chowing down beside me.

"In other words, this city grants the wishes slumbering in the deepest recesses of visitors' minds. Try to enjoy it. You may stay here for three days, so get some well-deserved rest."

"Huh."

"How generous!" High-Strung Elaina was chewing away beside me.

"By the way, there's no fee."

"Seriously?"

"Amaaaazing!"

"Well, I am the city's founder after all." The stranger in my body put her hand on her hip impatiently.

Let's give her the temporary name of "Devil Elaina."

Because she seems like someone took a minor character and made her a devil.

Devil Elaina continued, "Well, that's what's going on, so please rest for a while. My wish was to create a place where travelers can relax, you see."

Then she spread her wings and flew up into the sky.

She had appeared out of nowhere and disappeared just as suddenly.

"....."

It seems too good to be true, though, right? I smell something fishy. And her appearance was clearly demonic.

"...What do you think? About that woman, I mean."

After our host had disappeared into the horizon, I turned to High-Strung Elaina.

"She's awfully generous, huh?! That's just like someone who has the same body as me."

"....."

High-Strung Elaina was not only happy-go-lucky but terribly naive.

She's such a mess. I'm surprised she's survived this long on the road by herself.



Well then.

I had been told to rest and relax, but I didn't feel the least bit like doing that.

High-Strung Elaina and I were staying together in a cheap inn (deserted, of course), and both of us were awake until late that night.

Think about this, please. There was a person who looked exactly like me, with a devil-may-care personality entirely unlike mine. Moreover, when I asked her for her story, she told me she had started her journey the same way that I had and had visited all the same places.

It was so strange, I couldn't stand it.

However, I needed a little more information before I could put all the pieces together. What on earth could I have wished for that would cause another me to appear...?

I was at a total loss, even though it was my own doing.

The following morning, we resumed our exploration.

"Shall we head for the palace today?" I asked.

"The palace? Oh, is that where we met Mirarose?"

"Yes. Yesterday, we just looked around, but we didn't go in any of the buildings, right? So today, let's search through every inch of every building we've seen before."

"Oh-ho! I suppose there's something there?"

"We're going in to find that out."

With that, we decided to head for the palace.

After turning the wooden doors to ash, just as I had done before, we stepped foot inside.

"....."

"....."

Immediately after we did...

"Don't move!"

I recognized her voice right away. Apparently, there was yet another version of me here. She was standing in the foyer with her wand pointed at us. She was wearing unfashionable black-rimmed glasses, so let's call her Glasses Elaina.

"Are you two good Elainas? Or evil Elainas?" Glasses Elaina demanded, glaring at us.

Hang on, I have no idea what you're talking about.

"What do you mean, 'evil Elainas'? I'm me. I'm not evil whatsoever." "How much were those glasses?" said the two of us.

"....." She seemed to realize something from our responses. Glasses Elaina slowly lowered her wand. "I see... How many other Elainas have you two met so far? Assuming

the Elaina with horns and wings that looks like a devil isn't one of us, what number Elaina am I for you?"

The number of *me*'s and *I*'s and *us*'s was getting out of hand. I could already feel a headache coming on.

"You in the glasses makes two. We haven't met that many of us." *Come to think of it...* "Um, how many of us are there?"

"I don't know how many there are in total, but...there are fourteen of us here."

"Huh?"

"Wow, amazing!"

"Oh, including you two, that makes sixteen."

"Huhhh?"

"That many people cosplaying as me... Oh my, am I really that popular...?"

.....

Seriously? Sixteen?

My head's gonna explode...



Just as Glasses Elaina had said, in the throne room of the castle was a whole crowd of me. We stood before them all as Glasses Elaina directed.

"Everyone, it's time for introductions. These are the fifteenth and sixteenth Elainas."

My voice responded from all corners of the room. "Oh, hello there," and "Don't think you're special just because you're numbers fifteen and sixteen," and "Yeah, whatever," and so on.

I now understand why I wasn't given much of a welcome.

"All right then, I'll introduce you newbies to everyone else."

Then Glasses Elaina proceeded to point to them one by one.

“Over there is Dummy Elaina.”

“Hi there, fifteen and sixteen! I’m the cutest Elaina here!
Tee-hee.☆”

Starting with the cringey one, huh?

“The one moving around suspiciously over here is Girl-Lover Elaina.”

“Oh-ho-ho...sixteen of me... Ah, there are so many... Oh, could this be heaven?”

It would be better to call her Self-Lover instead of Girl-Lover, wouldn’t it?

“Over here is Bust-Size-Complex Elaina.”

“What’s this? If you two are also supposed to be the same as me, why are your chests are all shriveled, unlike mine? What happened? Are you drinking your milk? Hmm?”

That’s airheaded, even for me. Anyway, it looks like she has bunches of cotton stuffed in her shirt. Airhead.

“This is Slightly Peevish Elaina.”

“Huh? Could you not stare at me just because you’re late to the party? What is with you jerks? You wanna go? You wanna do this? Huh?”

She seems weak.

“This is Unsavory Elaina.”

“Heh-heh-heh...I could make serious bank if I robbed all the Elainas here...”

This one seems normal.

“This is Painful Elaina.”

“Uff! The black dragon-like thing imprisoned in my eye is trying to attack you all—get away!”

She certainly is painful. In several ways. And she’s wearing some sort of eyepatch.

“This is Lovesick Elaina.”

“Eh-heh-heh...SayaSayaSayaSaya...”

...? Why Saya?

“Hiding over there is Elaina Who Harbors Deep Darkness in Her Heart.”

“.....

.....I want to die.”

What happened there?

“Over there is Elaina Who Harbors Deep Darkness in Her Heart (The Second).”

“Oh no... It’s scary outside...”

Then why are you traveling?

“Also over there is Elaina Who Harbors Deep Darkness in Her Heart (The Third).”

“I can’t do it anymore... All the Elainas here should just die...”

How many of these are there? Aren’t we harboring a bit too much darkness in our hearts?

“Over here is Foreign Affectation Elaina.”

Privyet!

What does that mean?

“This is Gelatinous Elaina.”

Glorp.

Aaaand here come the demi-humans.

“And this is Ghoul Elaina.”

“Auggh.”

Something terrible must’ve happened to her...though I can probably guess what.

“And I’m Brainy Elaina.”

“You’re calling yourself that, huh...?”

“Because it’s true.” She puffed out her chest with pride. Even I got kind of upset at that. Then Glasses Elaina, renamed Brainy Elaina (self-appointed), said, “I think you already understand this, but we’ve each got special nicknames that we use here so we don’t get ourselves confused with the other Elainas. The names match up with each of our most prominent characteristics.”

“Uh-huh.”

“That being the case, I’d like to give names to number fifteen and number sixteen as well, but...what would be good, everyone? What kind of identifying characteristics do you think Elaina number fifteen has?” Brainy Elaina put a

hand on my shoulder and called out to the other Elainas in the room.

Voces responded from all corners.

"Characteristics? None, really." "Nothing special." "No boobs." "No individuality." "Nothiiing." "She's extremely un-individual. She's got no eyepatch, even." "Saya!" "I want to die." "Me, too." "I want a sleeplike death." "*Khorosh!*" *Glorp.* "Uahh."

"I see, I see. Thank you, everyone. Good consultation."

"....."

So no one is taking this seriously, I suppose?

Brainy Elaina looked at me elatedly.

"Since that's how it is, I'd like to name you Main Character Elaina, number fifteen. How about it?"

"What train of thought did you follow that led you to such a nonsensical nickname?"

"I tried to reframe your lack of any prominent characteristics as a strength."

"Sorry, but I'm not particularly happy hearing there's nothing special about me."

To which Brainy Elaina replied, "Isn't it a good thing to be without a single defining characteristic? You can become anything you want! Just like a main character."

Aren't you kind of making fun of me by calling me the main character?

"By the way, what about you, number sixteen?"

"I'm called High-Strung Elaina."

Only in my mind, though?

"I see, well then, let's call you that."

For someone who called herself intelligent, Brainy Elaina was a rather careless girl.



"But why exactly are you all holed up in a place like this?"

After hearing a quick rundown of each Elaina's travels while we were getting acquainted, I had confirmed that, as expected, each had visited all the same places as I had, though each of their stories was slightly different.

Brainy Elaina was the one who answered me. "I think I touched on this a little bit when we first met, but... apparently, a bad version of us slipped into the mix. Violent Elaina. She attacks any of us she meets, without warning."

"Huh."

"She's the violent one, so we call her Violent Elaina."

"Well put."

Apparently, while High-Strung Elaina and I had been wandering aimlessly around town, the other Elainas had been attacked by that Violent Elaina.

It was lucky the two of us didn't end up encountering Violent Elaina, huh?

"So then, you're holing up here to escape from Violent Elaina, is that it?"

I see. I'm kind of shocked.

"But your opponent is also an Elaina, right? If you confront her head on, shouldn't it at least result in a draw?"

This was my assumption, but Brainy Elaina shrugged her shoulders and said, "Think about it, Main Character Elaina. Really think about it. Our foe is also one of us, meaning it would be the same as inflicting self-harm. Can you imagine what might happen if she were to die?"

"....."

"Not a single one of us had any idea what to do, so the fourteen of us gathered here to discuss the matter. Should we wait right here until the third day, when the time limit placed by the city expires, or should we go out there and fight? Right now, we're at something of a crossroads."

"I see. And what if this place is attacked?"

"Well then, we would have no choice but to fight, though we'd rather keep that as a last resort. Right now, our two options are to shut ourselves up in here or go out there and

try to capture Violent Elaina. In short, the question is whether to act or to hide.”

“.....Hmm.”

“So what I want to know is, which do you think is the best option?”

“Oh, I don’t want you putting that decision on me.”

“What are you talking about? You’re Main Character Elaina, aren’t you? We’ll all be in trouble if the main character doesn’t take the helm at a time like this.”

I’ ll take the advisor role and assist the main character— she added, then sharply pushed her glasses up her nose with a finger.

...So you purposely decided to call me Main Character Elaina so you could use me to make your decisions, is that it? What a schemer. That’s just like me.

If she’s gonna be like that, then I also have a trick up my sleeve.

I sat on the throne and looked down at the other Elainas.

“Well then, everyone besides me, go and explore the city. I will wait here for your return. What do you think of that strategy?”

Immediately, booing erupted at me from the other Elainas.

“What’s this crazy jerk talking about?” “Down with dictators!” “Don’t joke around, please.” “Are you dumber than a flea?” “I can’t accept this.” “There’s no discussion to be had.” “Please resign as the main character.”

And so on.

I’d caused a big stir with just one statement.

They really say whatever they like, huh? I mean, what is with this? I was arbitrarily elevated to the position of main character, and now, when I try to take the helm like a main character would, I get this. I mean, they can show a little restraint, even when they’re making fun of me.

I might also turn into a Violent Elaina, you know?

“In that case, everyone make up your own mind.”

I raised my voice from where I sat on the throne while stuffing all my pent-up feelings down into the bottom of my stomach.

Then...

Wha-bam!

The door to the throne room opened with great force. No, rather, the door itself went flying into the space where we were all relaxing, crushing two of us beneath it.

Squish. A wet sound could barely be heard in the intervals between thunderous roars.

"Ahh! Ghoul Elaina is dead! She's been smushed!" "It's super gross!" "Ohh, the rotten stench is overpowering." "That's definitely an instant death."

"Aaugh..."

"Oh, she's alive."

The most important thing is that she's safe.

"And Gelatinous Elaina was squashed into jelly." "Wait, wasn't she jelly to begin with?" "You have a point." "That's true..." "Sorry, apparently both of them are fine."

The most important thing is that they're safe.

"—Ah, I was starting to think I would never find you. But you were all gathered here, weren't you?"

Interrupting the relaxed atmosphere, entirely devoid of any kind of tension or drama, an ice-cold voice rang out. Of course, the voice was my own, and the person who appeared after blasting the door off was—to no one's surprise—also me.

"This is just perfect. I'll dispose of each and every one of you right here." As she spoke, the new Elaina smiled and advanced toward us.

That Elaina had her hair cut short. It was exactly the same length mine had been after it had been cut off by a creepy doll in some other city somewhere. As she approached, an unpleasant atmosphere reminiscent of that time also followed her.

Perhaps...

"Um, excuse me? Is that Violent Elaina?"

"She is." Brainy Elaina nodded rapidly.

"...You there, sitting on the throne. Are you the leader who rules over these Elainas?" Violent Elaina glared at me.

"I don't know whether I'm the leader or not, but they called me Main Character Elaina."

"I see, I see. The main character, huh? You, the one sitting there grinning like an idiot, are supposed to be the main character?" She pointed her wand at me.

Countless spears materialized in the air around the wand's tip. "I don't like it. Please die."

Accompanied by her cold statement, all the spears flew at me at once. I conjured up an equal number and threw them back at her, intercepting her attack. The metallic sounds of their collisions filled the air, and small fragments of what had been spears poured down like rain, scattering around the room.

I looked down at her.

"I have absolutely no idea what you were thinking, attacking another Elaina just because you don't take a liking to her. Do you think you can win against sixteen of us?"

"Ah, Gelatinous Elaina and Ghoul Elaina are smushed, so there are actually fourteen," Brainy Elaina said beside me.

"...Do you think you can win against fourteen of us?"

However, Violent Elaina, despite her overwhelming numerical disadvantage, laughed. It was a fearless laugh, frigid and devoid of any of the emotions she ought to have been feeling.

"I don't live in a happy-go-lucky world like the rest of you. I'm different."

My, my, what the heck is she talking about?

"I don't suppose any of you have looked in a mirror lately... Ugh, that is *so* like me."

○

War broke out.

The other thirteen Elainas and I launched ourselves at Violent Elaina one after another.

Violent Elaina dealt with us one by one, never losing her composure.

Her first victim was Dummy Elaina. "All right." With an unenthusiastic shout, Dummy Elaina produced iron chains from the tip of her wand, but they were repelled instantly. "Ah!" Our first wave found herself transformed into a caterpillar, bound by chains.

Next was Bust-Size-Complex Elaina. Violent Elaina quickly closed the distance between them and kicked her aside after pulling out the wads of cotton she had stuffed in her shirt.

"Ahhh, my boobs..."

She fainted the moment the padding was removed.

Good riddance.

Next were the three Elainas Who Harbor Deep Darkness in Their Hearts. The trio fought rather bravely. "Scary, scary, scary, scary..." "Eek! Don't come over here!" "I want to go home." As they shouted all this and more at their opponent, the three Elainas shot fire, water, and lightning from their wands. The pillars of magical energy undulated and entwined as they swooped down on Violent Elaina.

Violent Elaina retreated as she dodged the attack and escaped the castle. We only realized it was a trap after the three Elainas Who Harbor Deep Darkness in Their Hearts went chasing after her. The ground outside had already been transformed into a swampy morass, and it swallowed the three Dark Elainas up, leaving only their heads sticking above the surface, before hardening again.

"...Heh-heh-heh. Looks like we're about to be executed." "It's cool and soothing inside the ground." "I want to return

to the earth like this..."

Looking over the three of them, who were for some reason sedate despite being quickly hardened into place, the rest of us flew up on our brooms. Violent Elaina was nowhere to be seen, so we spread out to search the area.

Suddenly, long ropes stretched out from the houses below, capturing four of the nine remaining Elainas and dragging them down to the rooftops.

When Violent Elaina appeared before us again, Foreign Affectation Elaina, Lovesick Elaina, Unsavory Elaina, and Girl-Lover Elaina had been altogether disposed of.

The five remaining Elainas tried to oppose her in some way, but despite the fact that she was taking on five opponents, Violent Elaina was as calm as could be. We were clearly not on her level.

Slightly Peevish Elaina raised a charming war cry—"You jerk!"—and closed the distance between them on her broom, but Violent Elaina evaded her attack, swatted her wand away, and with a powerful wand strike to the back of the neck, knocked her unconscious.

After Slightly Peevish Elaina fell onto the roof of a house somewhere, Painful Elaina, Brainy Elaina, and High-Strung Elaina encircled Violent Elaina, hitting her with spells from their wands.

The three of them slowly advanced on her, trying to keep her pinned down with showers of spears, or a torrent of water that writhed like a dragon, or masses of blue-white magical light, but as expected, Violent Elaina brushed them off with cool indifference.

The shower of spears she counteracted by hitting them with more of the same going the opposite direction, just as I had inside the castle. The writhing water she turned into ice and shattered. After dodging the balls of magical light and escaping the three Elainas, she battered them with her own magical attacks.

This Elaina trio was pushed back to the castle entrance,

where these Elainas collapsed in a heap near the three Elainas Who Harbor Deep Darkness in Their Hearts, still buried with only their heads aboveground.

“.....”

And then—

Violent Elaina, who had disposed of all the Elainas except for me in just a few minutes, landed her broom on the roof of a house that looked like it belonged in a faraway country where I had once taught magic to a young girl with black hair.

I was there waiting for her.

“You’re not fighting, I see. Even though the other Elainas are done for, you’re content to play the carefree observer, is that it?” She cast a reproachful glare at me.

“Because you were so confident. Being that certain of victory is a winning scheme in and of itself. I could see that if I flew out there without thinking, I wouldn’t stand a chance.”

“So then, to what conclusion have your observations led you?”

“Well, I don’t think I stand *zero* chance of beating you.”

In the end, I’m up against myself.

“You’re cheeky, aren’t you?”

“Yes. Just like you.”

“.....”

Violent Elaina didn’t reply. She just glared at me.

As I stared directly into her eyes, I asked, “By the way, why is your hair short?”

No, I think what I should have said is, Why did you leave it that way after it got cut?

“.....”

My hair had been cut off, oh, several weeks earlier, when I had visited a city lined with red brick buildings. If I remember correctly, I apprehended the criminal the day after my precious locks had been stolen by a Serial Slasher, who was going around using magical dolls to steal girls’

hair.

“Why had Violent Elaina left hers that way?

“You know the reason my hair was cut off, right?”

“I do because the same thing happened to mine.”

On the other hand, in some of the stories of the other Elainas, they hadn’t had their hair maimed. In the palace, I had gone around asking everyone about their lives, but although they had all encountered Sheila, apparently, some of them had met her after she had already resolved the matter on her own.

That meant that even though we were all the same Elaina, we hadn’t necessarily followed the exact same path.

“Certainly, I had my hair cut in that city. However, I didn’t have the energy to restore it, so I continued my travels, maintaining the short cut.”

“.....”

You didn’t have the energy? Why not?

“Did you go to the Clock Village of Rostolf?”

Violent Elaina looked at me hard with dark, dull eyes like a corpse’s.

“I did.” She nodded, as if it was a matter of course. She pointed to the clock tower rising above the sea of rooftops and added, “That’s the city with that clock tower, right? It was a good place.”

“.....A good place, huh? That city was a good place, you say?”

“Yes.”

The clock tower stood in the middle of the city, featured prominently in local theater, and was lovely to look at. It made an appearance in the popular play *Estelle of District Two*, which was perfect for killing time. The play depicted the life of a witch named Estelle, who came to hate evil from the bottom of her heart after her best friend was murdered when she was young. The throwaway ending was a little disappointing, when she said, “Until I find the culprit who killed my best friend, her struggle is not over,” but it was at

least good for staving off boredom.

“Well then, what about it?”

I tilted my head in confusion and stared at her. I finally realized what had turned the Elaina before my eyes into Violent Elaina.

“As expected, I am different than all of you.” Though she gripped her wand very, very tightly, her voice was calm. “There, in that city, I went back in time ten years. I returned to the past in order to save someone. What I saw there, though, was a reality more awful than anything else, and in the end, I couldn’t save anybody. Have you ever seen it? The moment when love turns to hate before your eyes? The moment when a person you love turns on you with murderous intent...”

“No, I haven’t.” I cut her off. “I don’t know what on earth happened, but you’re saying that because of that awful reality or whatever, you lost the energy to reclaim your hair and fell into despair?”

That’s the moment it happened. She waved her wand at me and fired several blasts of chilling ice.

“I haven’t fallen into despair. I’m seething with anger!”

“Oh. Anger over what?” I asked as I dodged the ice blasts.

“That should be obvious! I’m angry at myself!” Then the short-haired Elaina said, “I resent all the different versions of me who just continued their carefree travels, unlike me. And I’m angry with myself, because I couldn’t do anything to change the terrible reality before my eyes.”

So this is just a messed-up way for her to vent.

That’s just like me.



And so we had ourselves a little war.

First, she used her wand to conjure several massive

icicles. I dodged them one by one, then in return, I used a spell to lift up all the roof tiles spread around my feet and made them fly at her from all directions.

She knocked them all down using her icicles, as if she had known from the beginning that was what I was going to do. She then produced a huge ball of ice in the air. It seemed Violent Elaina liked using attacks that involved ice.

She dropped the giant ice ball directly where I was standing, but a large attack like that is just flashy and dramatic—nothing to worry about, really.

I jumped on my broom and dodged the strike. The house I had been standing on was crushed beneath the ice... There was nothing I could do about that.

The attack with the roof tiles hadn't done much of anything, so this time, I used a spell to pick up an entire house and hurl it at her. However, she was unscathed. She surrounded herself with a wall of ice just in time.

She really loves ice!

After that, our conflict fell into a bit of a pattern. She would use a spell to conjure lots of ice and chuck it at me. While dodging, I would use a spell to pick up one of the many surrounding houses and throw it at her.

She seemed to like flashy, dramatic attacks, so I matched her and also made quite a spectacle.

As she was conjuring yet another ball of ice, Violent Elaina shouted, "People like you...gah! I wish people like you would just disappear!"

"Exactly who are you saying that to? To me? Or to yourself?"

".....Be quiet," she spat. "Do you know what led me to this city? This is the City of Granted Wishes. I absolutely could not forgive you Elainas who just travel around so carefree, without any painful memories, so I came here. I found my way here to make all you other Elainas feel the same way I do..."

"That's your wish, not ours." I answered her as calmly as

possible. "This city grants my wish at the same time it grants everyone else's, so your way of thinking is mistaken. It's very, very mistaken."

When I came to this country and encountered the various other Elainas, I had had one thought.

Devil Elaina—the person who created the city—had said something like this, hadn't she?

Your true desires are something no one knows.

Perhaps in your heart of hearts, you were thinking you'd like to visit these places once again.

In other words, rather than my surface-level wish for wealth and riches, there was another, more powerful wish, deep in the recesses of my heart.

"In that case..." Violent Elaina's voice was trembling. "In that case, what are you saying?! What force are you saying gathered us all here?!"

"You don't know?" I answered indifferently. "Or are you just pretending not to?"

"Don't make fun of me!"

With that...

She sent blasts of ice at me one after another.

Meanwhile, I continued reducing the city to rubble.

Our abilities were miserably well matched, and no matter how much magic we threw at each other, neither of us could get the upper hand. Though to be honest, she was probably stronger than me, as she had already taken down the other Elainas.

However.

I suppose you know how the fight, spun out of many layers of our shared history, came to an end, don't you?

There were really only two possibilities. The first possibility was total victory for one of us. The winner would go down in history as a righteous hero, and the loser would be remembered as an evil villain. That was the ending that would leave a bad aftertaste.

Happily, that isn't the one that came to pass. Our fight

was evenly matched to the very last; there was no way to decide a clear winner and loser.

In other words, we were headed for the second possible outcome.

“.....”

“.....”

It must have been several hours since we'd started fighting.

We found ourselves staring up at the sky together in the ruins of a city, more than half of which had been reduced to rubble.

In the blue heavens, clear like after the passing of a storm, vibrant gray, nearly white, clouds spread out, tracing patterns in the air.

The two of us had both used up nearly all our magical energy.

We were both out of power, and for better or worse, our fight was still undecided. This was the second way it could end and the option we had taken.

Then, as is often the case, there was only one way this could proceed.

“...For what possible purpose did I come to this city?” she asked sharply.

“Before I answer that, let me tell you what I unknowingly wished for in the deepest part of my heart,” I said while gazing at the sky. “I’m certain I came here to meet the other Elainas.”

It’s said that this city will grant your wishes.

Well, I wasn’t surprised to learn I wanted to look at some other possibilities. Traveling is a series of meetings and separations and, at the same time, a series of decisions. When you look back on it, sometimes you have a strange experience and sometimes you miss out.

But what if there was a version of me who hadn’t missed out? What if there was a version of me who had the strange encounter? What then?

What if it was possible to have versions of me besides myself?

I was certain the very possibility was what I had wished for. That was why I'd come to this place and met the other versions of myself.

"Even so, that doesn't explain why I came here."

You still don't get it...

"Yes, it does. You must have also felt a yearning for your other selves, just like I did. Your yearning for the version of yourself that didn't get caught up in the tragedy at the Clock Village of Rostolf brought you to this place."

"....."

"You don't hate the rest of us as much as you think you do. You're wishing for the possibility of a you that isn't you, of a self that didn't experience that awful incident. That's why you came here. It certainly wasn't so you could hurt your other selves but because somewhere in your heart, you were wishing for the possibility of a different you."

It certainly wasn't so you could hurt the rest of us Elainas.

You found your way here in order to heal your own wounds.

I'm sure the rest of us are the same. We came here because we wanted to know the possibility of a self different from ourselves.

"...That would just be selfish." She sounded like she was criticizing someone she was pretending not to know.

"Wishing for other possibilities for yourself isn't a bad thing. Besides, you said it would be selfish, but you're the only one here, you know?"

Then I took her hand.

Her slender white fingers trembled in surprise when I touched them, as if they were going to pull away for a moment, but after that, she gradually entwined her fingers with mine.

"...Will you listen? To the story of when I went back in

time ten years?" She turned her gaze away from the sky and stared at me.

I stared back. "That's why I came here."
And that's how our war concluded.
Not with a winner and a loser but another way.
With reconciliation.



Let me tell you what happened after that.

Together with Short-Haired Elaina (formerly Violent Elaina), I went to collect the other Elainas. We had virtually destroyed the city, so I was afraid some of the other Elainas might have gotten crushed beneath the buildings or the ice. Luckily, all of them were completely unharmed.

"That was an amazing fight, huh?" "Do you know how hard we worked to go around and collect everyone?" "Even when making a ridiculous uproar, please don't get too carried away, okay?" "Fighting amongst ourselves! I really do some foolish things, don't we?" "You dummy."

They had already finished collecting themselves.

Some of the other Elainas had herded the rest back to the palace.

"....." "....."

By the way, the Elainas who'd scolded us a moment ago were the ones who'd collected the others.

Apparently, they had all been hiding around the city and watching the battle play out. There were all kinds of Elainas in existence, so I'm sure those were the types always content to stand on the sidelines.

"Having this many of me, though, is... How do I say it? It feels weird."

At my words, High-Strung Elaina spat, "You're just mentioning this now? I mean, all of you are cosplaying me, aren't you? I'm sure you all think you're just the spitting

image of my character.”

It seemed she still had her head in her carefree world.

“Well then, what are you planning to do now? According to what Devil Elaina—that is, the Elaina who looks like a demon—said, we still have about a day left here.”

The bystander Elainas made puzzled faces at Brainy Elaina, who had a finger on the edge of her glasses.

“First of all, we should be asking whether we can trust that demonic Elaina.” “That girl is suspicious-looking.” “I think she’s definitely hiding somewhere around here.” “She’s definitely doing something behind the scenes.”

They were quite right.

However...

“To put it another way, no matter what we do, one day should be no problem, right? Our stay in this country is limited to three days, meaning that something bad is likely to happen once the three days are up.”

“I see.” “That’s just the kind of thing a self-proclaimed main character would think.” “So that means it’s all right for us to stay until the third day, right?” “It would be a great way to save on hotel charges.”

The bystander Elainas basically seemed to have no inclination to work hard. It was also in their nature to hate waste, so they were apparently very taken with this city, where we could acquire anything and everything for free.

As a result, we spent the rest of that day enjoying ourselves in the city.

We ate what we wanted to eat and drank what we wanted to drink. After carousing around as much as we liked, I stood before all the other Elainas, holding a glass of wine in one hand.

“Everyone, it’s fine to have a good time, but will you listen to my proposal?”

It’s rare to be gathered together like this.

It would be a waste to just play around.

“Everyone, do you have a notebook in the pocket of your

robe?"

So let's try making one more memory while we bask in the memories of our travels.

We all brought our travel diaries together.

As expected, each of our stories seemed to follow its own path. For example, when I was having a totally boring day, on the same day, a different Elaina was going through a fateful encounter, and so on. They were all different.

In the Clock Village of Rostolf, where I enjoyed several days of entirely ordinary sightseeing, the Elaina who now had short hair had apparently gone through a really bitter ordeal, so even though we were the same Elaina, we had spun very different stories.

It had occurred to me, after meeting High-Strung Elaina and heading for the castle, that it might be interesting to collect everyone's stories. Anyhow, we had one day left, so I decided to make it happen.

All of us gathered in the spacious throne room of the castle and passed each of our diaries around to read.

"I see, that's a good idea, pretending to be a fortuneteller in the city with high prices..." "Miss Fran is the same as always, no matter which of us she's with, huh?" "These are some unspeakably awful people?" "Oh, the Country of Truth Tellers..." "The Saya in this story was the cutest." "What are you talking about?" "Don't you mean she was the craziest?" "And yet you were happy to receive the necklace." "....." "Aauugh..." "How did Ghoul Elaina wind up as a ghoul, I wonder?" "She probably didn't escape from Dead Man's Paradise." "What a dummy." "Yeah, really." "By the way, why are you wearing an eyepatch?" "This is where the black dragon—" "Oh, enough already." "Aren't your boobs a little big?" "This is just cotton." "Oh, enough already!"

I took a seat on the throne as I watched them making a

fuss over the diaries spread out on the floor.

“I’ll listen to your story, as promised.”

“.....” Sitting on the arm of the throne, leaning her shoulder against the back of it, Short-Haired Elaina produced her diary from her robe. “In that city, I...”

Then I took her diary from her and passed her mine in return.

After that, for a little while, we were absorbed in reading each other’s stories.

There were also many things we all had in common.

In the countries we visited, without exception, we had all encountered the same people. For example, we all met Saya in the Country of Mages and met her again in the Honest Land. In that way, we all encountered the same people in the same places.

And then, in the same way, we separated from them.

Also, it’s probably a matter of course, but our reasons for beginning our journeys were the same, and our teachers were all the same. With only the slightest variations between us, we were inspired to become witches by *The Adventures of Niche* and then trained under Miss Fran. Up to that point, our stories were exactly the same, just like copies.

After everyone had finished reading everyone else’s stories, someone suddenly made a suggestion.

“Wouldn’t it be interesting to make this into a book? Something like *The Adventures of Niche*, for example.”

Not a single one of us rejected that proposal. On the contrary, everyone nodded like they had hoped for that very thing.

The title of the finished book was the last thing to be decided. We put forth many candidates, but in the end, we settled on my suggestion by majority vote.

Imitating our beloved book *The Adventures of Niche* by

calling it *The Adventures of Elaina* would also have been good, but if we did that, it would be too similar to an embarrassing error of the past that somebody somewhere would like to erase from history, and more importantly, it wasn't particularly clever.

Of course, an eccentric title would be a better fit for an eccentric protagonist like us.

And so we settled on this title.

We called it *The Journey of Elaina*.



It was the morning of the third day.

Most of us (especially the bystander Elainas) had strongly objected to leaving, but there was no one among us who knew what was going to happen now.

After handing out copies of *The Journey of Elaina* to everyone, I halfway forced them to disperse.

As we were responsible for the considerable damage that had been done to the city, Short-Haired Elaina and I stayed behind and searched to make sure there were no others hiding anywhere.

"No one else here, huh?"

" Nope, there isn't." I nodded at Short-Haired Elaina.

After looking at me for a moment, she looked back at the city around us. Morning sunlight was shining in through a part of the city we had only narrowly avoided leveling, spreading a pale scarlet color over her ash-gray hair.

With the beautiful scenery behind her, she wore an expression that seemed just a little bit lonely.

"What are you planning to do from here?"

When I asked, she gently combed down her short hair.

"I thought I might go and get my hair back. It's probably still implanted in one of the dolls."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, well, since the culprit has already been caught, I should be able to find it just by searching for the dolls."

"I hope you find them."

"Yeah."

Neither of us wanted to say good-bye.

For starters, she was me, so it was strange to speak of separation. Saying good-bye to someone I could see anytime I looked in a mirror...I found it somehow odd.

.....

Well, that was the reason I was willing to admit to anyway.

I simply didn't want to say those parting words.

And so...

"Thank you, Elaina," she said.

"Don't mention it, Elaina," I replied.

With just that exchange, she left the city.



I had one final thing that I needed to do.

"I'm alone now!" I called out to no one in particular. My voice echoed loudly through the city, which answered only with silence and made me think it could echo everywhere without me even having to strain my voice.

In fact, sure enough, the one I'd been waiting for came when she heard my call. The girl adorned with two twisted horns descended to where I was standing, flapping her bat-like wings.

"You called?"

Devil Elaina had appeared.

"Yes, because there's something that I really want to discuss with you."

"I don't really have anything to say, though."

"....." I stared at this girl who had demonstrated she would never pass up the chance to crack a joke. "I realized

your true identity halfway through.”

“Before we discuss my true identity or whatever, I’d like you to take responsibility for trashing my city.”

She’s funny, really.

“This place is in a dream, right? I don’t think there’s any responsibility to be taken.”

“...Hmm.”

The City of Granted Wishes, where I encountered all the other Elainas, was built entirely out of parts of other countries I had visited. That was one conclusion I had drawn from the state of this place, which was full of all kinds of impossible phenomena.

This was my dream world, and everything in this dream was being shown to me by the Devil Elaina before my eyes.

It seemed irrational.

It was, though, a very compelling conclusion.

“The state of this city—This place looks like you crammed every ideal thing into one...and that reminded me of another incident in a certain country.”

All the citizens had fallen into dreams, and while everyone else was sleeping, only one lone girl was left behind. It had been quite sad.

The peacefully sleeping citizens all got lost in dreams of their ideal worlds created by a certain demon, and when three days had passed, they died in their sleep.

Three days—exactly the same amount of time Devil Elaina had given us.

“You meddle with people’s dreams and consume their life force by trapping them inside their idealized worlds. And I’m one of your victims. Am I wrong?”

“Oh-ho!” She smiled slightly and shook her head. “You’re just a little off the mark. You haven’t joined them yet.”

“That’s right. Because it hasn’t been exactly three days yet.”

There are still a few hours left.

“So what are you planning to do? Will you stay here like

this and become my nourishment?"

"Certainly not. Why do you think I tore up the city so much and drove all the other Elainas away?"

"....."

Well, it was mostly coincidence that the city had gotten trashed, but driving all the other Elainas away had been part of the plan.

It was likely the other Elainas who had appeared here had been reproduced from my memories and were my other possible selves. In other words, they were images I had created out of my yearning for alternative possibilities.

"Even if this was my dream world and not any of the other Elainas', there's nothing I desire here anymore. There is absolutely no reason for me to stay in this dream."

"...You did well. What a shame. I thought for sure that a witch's life force would be particularly delicious."

"If you were hoping to get a witch for dinner, I'd say your makeshift plan has backfired." I took my wand in hand.
"Well then, hurry up and let me out of here. If you don't—"

"If I don't, you're going to hurt me? Ha-ha-ha, what a fool you are." She cackled and then said, "If you go out the gate like normal, you'll return to the real world. I never prevented anyone from leaving in the first place, and I don't pursue anyone who leaves. If you want to escape, you can." She waved me away.

".....So you've consumed a lot of people's life forces by doing this?"

I suppose that, after waiting for the allotted three days, she devours the life force of anyone who chooses to stay.

"That's right. It's how I eat, you see."

"...You feed on people's lives? Don't you feel guilty for devouring innocent humans?"

"To me, a human life is nothing more than a meal. Do you think it's unforgivable to eat the meat of livestock?"

"....."

"You look like you want to say you can't understand me.

I'm not really trying to get you to understand or anything. Creatures like me are different than you humans, down to the most fundamental parts. I never thought for a second we could understand each other."

"...That's too bad. If you could use your power in a more amicable way, you would probably have been useful to humans."

"Ha-ha-ha, you really are a dummy!" she said frankly.
"Why should I befriend my livestock?"

Different down to the most fundamental parts.

I see. Sure enough, the beings we call demons would probably be like that.

"Oh, right, right. I'm not going to hold you back, but let me tell you something good."

"...What is it?"

I was just about to take my leave.

She spoke offhandedly, as cheerful as always.

"The Elainas who came here; they weren't just your imagination... *All of them were the real you.*"



Gray clouds, nearly white, drew patterns as they moved through the clear sky, like they do after a storm has passed.

The breeze made a commotion as it ran through the grass, forming waves of brilliant green. Tickling my nose was the fragrance of early spring with the scent of winter still lingering in the warm sunshine.

Blue and green, and a little bit of white, were reflected in my eyes.

"...This place."

Apparently, I had been in a deep sleep, smack in the middle of a field.

Exactly how long was I out? My memory before falling

asleep was hazy, and I couldn't really recall much. *Why, how, and for what reason was I sleeping in the middle of a field?*

Though I remember the events that took place during my dream pretty vividly.

“.....”

Then it suddenly came to me.

I can't remember what happened before I fell asleep, so let's look at the diary. Diaries are useful things when your memory is hazy. I think it should be in my robe.

“...Here.”

When I fished around in my robe, a book fell out along with my diary.

It had a very plain cover with the title and my name written on it. By hand.

“.....”

It was, without a doubt, the book we had created while in the dream.

Ah, now that I think of it, the people who come out of those kinds of dreams usually get to take one thing with them.

I see. So mine was this book.

For a moment, I compared the two books in my hands then returned one to my robe pocket.

“...The diary can wait until later.”

I'm going to get back to my travels after I finish reading this book. It's no big deal. I've got plenty of time.

Plus, right now, I feel like taking a trip down memory lane.

So I crossed my legs and sat in the middle of the field.

As if urged on by the cool breeze, I carefully flipped the book open.

Inside, sure enough, was my story.

©Azure





Afterword

Long time no see. I'm Jougi Shiraishi.

Time passes quickly, and before I knew it, two years had gone by since I first self-published *The Journey of Elaina*. At the outset, I myself didn't have the slightest idea it would get published commercially, yet here I am writing this afterword two years later. Life truly is a mysterious thing.

So that was *The Journey of Elaina*, Volume 3.

This time around, I snuck in an explanation of the title, Elaina got a haircut, and all kinds of other things happened. Most importantly, I think I originally said in the Afterword to Volume 1 something like, "There's no deeper meaning to the title, and such a word doesn't exist," but...that was probably a version of me from another world who wrote that. I would be much obliged if you would allow me to explain it away in such a lazy way.

When I wrote Volume 2, I was feeling hopeless, like, "Ah! I want to write dark stories!" so I only sent the editor dark, depressing stories, and that book turned out pretty heavy overall. I regret that. That's why this time around, I decided to make this book basically all lighthearted stories (though I'm not saying there aren't some dark ones).

I've got several lines left before the thank-yous, so I'd like to get deep and talk about my memories of *The Journey of Elaina* for about four more lines.

It was about five years ago when I first thought up Elaina's character. At that time, as I recall, I feel like I established her as just some cute girl who flew in from a parallel universe or something, but after letting the character sit for about three years, she turned into a

traveler with lots of toxic baggage. I started to feel like, *What's the deal with this parallel universe stuff?* Storytelling truly is a mysterious thing.

With that, I've used up my extra lines, so on to the Acknowledgments.

Azure.

Thank you as always for your adorable illustrations. At this point, you've drawn all sorts of characters and various aspects of Elaina, but personally, I really like Elaina with short hair. When you showed me the cover of Volume 3 for the first time, she was so cute, I wondered, *Oh, is this an angel?* Truly, thank you.

M, the editor.

Thank you very much for not tossing me aside when I wanted to write dark stories right away and for digging deep into the story until the manuscript for Volume 3 was completed at last. This is off topic, but I hear that M's daughter is reading *The Journey of Elaina*, and that is this year's biggest news.

Finally, all of you readers.

The fact that I've made it as far as Volume 3 is wholly due to the support of you readers. Thank you very much. It's an honor to think the characters I wrote in *The Journey of Elaina* are so beloved.

Since I assembled fourteen chapters into this one volume, the story has grown to a total of forty-two chapters, and the page count is not insignificant, either. Despite that, you've all come along with me this far, and I truly have nothing but gratitude for that.

Now—

I'm going to talk with the assumption that you have read the preceding fourteen chapters of Volume 3.

I think that anyone who has read through to the end might have guessed certain things already, and largely in accordance with your suspicions, *The Journey of Elaina*, which I have been so humbly allowed to write for GA

Novels, will be coming to an end for now.

At the same time, I will be starting a new series.

I want to tell a story that will appeal to those of you who took a liking to Elaina in this series, though. That is, I want to write a sequel to this world. Also, I think that Caliostro from *Granblue Fantasy* is cute.

After discussing the matter with M, the editor, and then a plot meeting with other editors, the end result is that I'm going to pen a different work set in the same world as *The Journey of Elaina* as a new series for GA Novels. It seems like it will be a story where two protagonists stay in one country and solve various mysteries that happen there. (That's the plan.)

It will be published in a paperback edition this time, so there will be no difficulty finding places that sell it. Also, the price is going to be about half as much as *Elaina* (sales promotion). Now, I said it was going to be a different work set in the same world, but in actuality, it will be more like a sequel to *The Journey of Elaina* (blatant sales promotion). As a matter of course, Elaina will make an appearance—or more like, she will play an active part as one of the main characters, complete with her usual sarcastic yet polite way of speaking (extremely blatant sales promotion). Also, as far as the illustrations go, it sounds like Azure will remain in charge of them (yay!).

As for the release date...it'll probably be around the spring of 2017...maybe (wishful thinking).

Something like that.

So there you have it, *The Journey of Elaina* is going to end for now, but I'll see you in the next series!

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